

The
LAW
of the



TALON

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THE LAW OF THE TALON

The
LAW OF THE TALON

BY
LOUIS TRACY

AUTHOR OF "THE BLACK CAT," "THE GLEAVE MYSTERY,"
"THE WINGS OF THE MORNING," ETC., ETC.



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CHAPTER I

NEWS FROM A FAR LAND

ON the morning of the first Wednesday in June, not so long ago, a tall man, gaunt and erect, but otherwise, if one would be kind, a good deal of a nondescript, stood in the doorway of a log hut overlooking one of the innumerable lakes of Northern Alberta. Close to his feet reposed a large, woolly dog, seemingly relaxed in slumber, but with ears cocked and eyes wide open.

Man, dog, and hut were singularly in keeping. Utility, not art, was their dominant note. The logs were rough hewn, but well put together. The man, dressed in coarse canvas shirt, with sleeves rolled high above the elbows, and trouser ends tucked into strong, loose-fitting boots reaching nearly to his knees, was powerfully built. The dog was just plain "dog." Nevertheless, man, dog, and hut conveyed a first impression that each could be depended on in an emergency; and life in that wilderness was made up of little else than emergencies.

Of course appearances are often deceptive. The cabin seemed to be a capacious one. It was not. The door led into a small room containing a couple of bunks, a table bolted to the smoother logs which

formed the floor, three clumsy chairs, an oilstove, and a litter of guns, fishing tackle, cooking utensils, and tins. For the rest—that is to say, for three-quarters of the area covered by the low roof—the place was a branch store established by the Hudson Bay Company mainly for the reception of pelts brought in by trappers from fantastic regions to the north and west. Its more restricted but quite important mission was to supply the said trappers with the simple necessities of existence in a country where existence was almost phenomenally difficult.

The man, who looked about forty years of age, was actually under thirty. He might own a well-shaped head and clean-cut features; if he possessed these pleasing attributes a shock of untidy hair and a three weeks-old stubble on cheeks and chin effectually concealed them.

The dog, owing to his thick coat, suggested obesity, whereas he was actually a lean hound of wiry muscles and super-canine intelligence.

But it was Nature herself that wore the most misleading mask. On that fine morning Moose Lake was a mirror of burnished silver set in a frame of golden-brown rock, white sand, and a wealth of vegetation classed in general terms as green, but which literally displayed every tint of the rainbow.

“An earthly Paradise” was its fitting description—for the hour. But summer is short and winter is long in the Far North. Not even the Indians, born and bred to polar cold, regarded Moose Lake as a health resort after October. Yet there were not lacking definite signs of continuous human habitation. The uneven floor showed a worn track from the entrance and around the table. On a shelf were a few books, lop-eared by

much use. A Shakespeare, in particular, was broken-backed and positively grubby. In rear of the main building were two great piles of sawn wood. Close to these, stoutly constructed with padlocked doors, was a small hut obviously designed to hold a stock of dried fish and pemmican, the frozen and fat-protected flesh of animals and birds which in its allotted season has to be cut out with an axe before being boiled into an excellent stew. In effect, someone lived there all the year round. Those who knew the social amenities of Moose Lake during seven months of the year needed no further enlightenment as to the why and the wherefore. Even a rare patrol of Canadian Mounted Police was not unduly inquisitive. If any poor devil chose to leave the outer world and dig in there—well, let him!

The present tenant did not seem greatly worried by his lot. He had just breakfasted, and was rolling some tobacco between the palms of his hands when his clear blue eyes—eyes which at most times conveyed a hint of wistfulness—discovered a small black speck three miles away at the north-west end of the lake. The silver changed to blue there owing to the shadow cast by a great hill, on whose northern upper slopes the snow never melted. The log hut occupied a clearing on a south-westerly spur which thrust a wooded bluff well out into the centre of the lake. It was thus admirably situated for its purpose—near the water, protected from the full fury of the worst storms, yet perched high enough to give a wide view of the two only possible lines of approach, that from civilisation and the south, represented by Edmonton, three hundred miles distant, and the other from savagery and the immeasurable north.

“Dash it all!” said the man aloud, “this must be

Mosquito Joe and his Siwash, three days ahead of schedule. It's the fine weather, of course. I'll just be able to have a scrape before they turn up."

In justice to the unshaven one it should be explained that all the seven razors he kept in a leather case marked with the days of the week had gone out of service about the same time. He sent them to Peace River Landing, eighty miles away, by a friendly Indian about the middle of May, and they had been returned at a late hour the previous night.

The dog rose. It was not his business to detect canoes at the top of the lake. But he could see, smell, or hear a timber wolf when other huskies would be engaged in the innocent and healthful pastime of catching fleas. Also he could understand the slightest inflections of his master's voice. He not only knew that Mosquito Joe and a Siwash were approaching, but took good care to keep out of the way when a kettle tilted some of its contents into a tin cup. He was interested in the shaving operations, too. A smooth cheek was nicer to lick than a bristly one.

The razors were packed in a piece of soft hide corded in such manner that no water could penetrate in the event of a canoe upsetting. An English newspaper, one of the really useful weeklies which contain a digest of the week's news for readers abroad, was wrapped around the leather case. On it lay a note, which read:

Dear Jim—Sorry I haven't a spare stone. You must get one from Edmonton. I enclose a copy of the *Overs* just to hand. There's a photo in it of a guy just like you.—Yours till hell freezes,

GEORGE MACDONALD.

"Good old scout, George," Jim told the dog confidentially. "I wonder who the guy like me is? Poor blighter! I hope the resemblance is only skin deep."

He threw the paper on the table and began a vigorous lathering. The first razor he tried was in the pink of condition, and in three minutes he looked a different man. Taking a pair of scissors from a box and grabbing a small mirror off the window-shelf, he went outside and cut his hair rather skilfully.

By this time the canoe was less than a mile away. He had yet a few minutes in which to glance through the newspaper before strolling down to the rock which would serve the newcomers as a landing-stage.

The picture concerning which that "good old scout, George," had written was soon found—too soon indeed, if an observant dog knew aught of human nature, for the man's blue eyes lost their wistfulness and blazed instantly into a fury that was worse than volcanic, being glacially vindictive. They were glowering at a picture of a very pretty girl and two men, one elderly and aristocratic, the other younger and rather stout. They were posed in front of a charming old stone porch approached by a few wide steps. The portrait of another man—quite a youngster this—was enclosed in an oval which blocked out part of the background. Beneath ran a couple of explanatory lines:

"Mr. Alistair Spenser Panton and his fiancée, Miss Eileen Grant, with Lord Oban at Inverlochtié. (Inset—the Hon. John Bridgnorth Panton, whose death is presumed by the Courts. See p. 8)."

"Poor little Eileen—marrying that rotter, Asp!" uttered the man named "Jim," who, nevertheless, was remarkably like the Hon. John Bridgnorth Panton, or

must have been like him some five or six years earlier. Then his eyes softened.

"Poor little Eileen!" he murmured again. "How in God's name has this wretched business come about? Well, let's see page 8."

Perhaps anger had melted unto pity rather suddenly, or it may have been that he was unaccustomed to searching for one small item among crowded columns, but he fumbled over the task, and even when he was staring at the printed words they were slow to penetrate to his bemused brain. Yet they were very much to the point. This is what he said:

THE OBAN PEERAGE.

DEATH OF THE HEIR PRESUMED.

In the Probate Division yesterday the President, Lord Mountford, gave leave to presume the death as having occurred since August 31, 1918, of the Hon. John Bridgnorth Panton, only son and heir, had he survived, of Hector Alistair, tenth baron Oban.

Mr. Harvey, K.C., who appeared for the family, stated that Mr. Panton was supposed to have sailed for the United States on the given date, though, if he did so, he must have shipped as a sailor or fireman under an assumed name, since there was no trace of him in the records of the principal Transatlantic shipping companies. Unfortunately, there had been a family dispute, but the facts need not be gone into for the purposes of this application. If living, Mr. Panton would have inherited a sum of over £100,000 under the will of his aunt, Eleanor, Lady Bridgnorth, who died in June, 1921. At that time he was advertised for throughout the world.

The President inquired what steps to assure publicity had been taken in regard to the present application, and counsel said that similar measures were adopted early in the current year. It was Lord Oban's wish now that in the interests of the next heir, Mr. Alistair Spenser Panton, a nephew, the position should be regularised.

The President remarked that if Mr. Panton were dead he must have died among people who did not know his identity. In the circumstances he would make the order as requested, suspending its operation for two months, namely, until the last day of June next. The proceedings in that court would doubtless be reported in the Press, and thus provide a final and widely circulated advertisement.

"So that's the game, is it?" growled Jim, and a fiercer surge of passion boiled up in him as the meaning of it all grew clear. "Exit the heir, presumed dead, and enter the villain as heir-presumptive, with a presumable reversionary interest in the hundred thousand quid. . . . There's a damned lot of presuming going on, but the worst presumption of all is that Asp should dare to marry Eileen. That mustn't happen. . . . God! Can it be stopped?"

He sought the date of the newspaper—April 29. It was now June 3rd, and the nearest telegraph station was at Athabasca, two hundred miles away. Of course, he could not get there in time to cable that wise old judge who did not take for granted everything he was told by even the most eminent K.C. Even so, the mere announcement that the Hon. John Bridgnorth Panton was very much alive and bent on coming home to claim his rights would not necessarily prevent the marriage.

Perhaps Eileen was married already! God in heaven, what was to be done then? Let the Honourable John remain dead and be——

The dog growled, not in a hostile manner, but as one might say, "Hallo! That you?"

A shadow darkened the door and an Indian entered, or would have entered had he not been startled out of the dignified reserve of his race by the frenzied glare in the eyes of the man he had come to greet.

He gurgled something, but Jim, hitherto so friendly and amusing that even an Indian had to smile occasionally, thrust forth a barring hand with pointing finger.

"Out damned Spot! Out, I say," he shouted. The visitor turned quickly.

Now this was a singular instance of the force of habit. Jim, who felt anything but humorous at the moment, had a trick of puzzling his Indian acquaintances by hurling Shakespearian phrases at them. To-day the sequel was distinctly ludicrous. The dog, whose name was Spot, hurried after the Indian, whereupon his master burst into a loud laugh. At that the dog came back.

The Siwash, however, was annoyed. He strode down the slope to rejoin a wizened, leather-clad little fellow, who was evidently perplexed by the non-appearance of the log hut's inmate.

"What's up?" shouted the trapper as his companion drew near. "Where's Jim? Ain't he in? I thought I heered him."

The Indian grunted, and touched his head significantly.

"Hell's bells!" cried the other. "Not drunk already, is he? Why couldn't he wait? He saw me comin'."

"No drunk," said the Indian. "Mad! Devil get him!"

"You're crazy with the heat, you pore, misguided infidel. Why, here he comes now, laffin' fit to bust himself. You don't understand that play-actin' talk of his—that's what's wrong wi' you. What'd he say—'The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!' or some fool thing of the sort?"

The noble red man made no reply. Of the little he comprehended there was nothing that called for comment. He knelt near some high-covered parcels already landed from the canoe and began knotting ropes in such wise that portorage was simplified.

Mosquito Joe gave no further heed to him. No white man can fathom the Indian mind, which may be either profoundly deep or indescribably empty. It was more to the point to study the behaviour of Jim Parke, district agent in the employ of the Hudson Bay Company. Here was a man who never hurried hurrying, one who never allowed the most dramatic events to ruffle him, now betraying excitement in face and demeanour. Why, Joe recalled the night a lighted paraffin lamp was knocked over in the hut by accident, and the leaping flames were already licking a keg of gunpowder, when Jim calmly walked through the burning oil, lifted the keg, threw it outside, and choked out the fire by spreading raw pelts and stamping on them. He made no more fuss then than if a jug of cold water had been upset; now, that hysterical laughter having ceased, he was almost running in his haste.

Yet the two met with the accustomed nonchalance of the great spaces.

"How do, Joe?"

"How do, Jim?"

"I've news for you, Joe. I'm for England! I've got to hit the trail for Edmonton within an hour."

"Kind-a sudden, ain't it, after the best part o' five years?"

"Yes. But needs must when the devil drives."

"*Tiens!* Markwa there said somethin' about the devil bein' around. Gosh, but he's a long way from home at Moose Lake!"

Then the tall man smiled.

"Sorry, Markwa," he said. "I didn't mean to vex you. It was not Old Nick but a well-disposed Providence that sent you two here to-day. Though I must get back to England without loss of an unnecessary minute, if you hadn't arrived ahead of time I must have stood fast, eating my heart out. You'll take charge here, Joe, and Markwa will help me up the Wabiskaw as far as the depot. I can get a horse there for Athabasca. Markwa will return in six days, possibly bringing a man with him. Anyhow, the agent will send a relief without much delay."

Mosquito Joe tickled his scalp with a forefinger deftly inserted under a broad-brimmed hat. This breathless arrangement was sweeping him off his feet.

"I don't 'xactly know as how that plan'll altogether suit neether me ner the agent," he said perplexedly.

"It's going through, if I have to padlock you to the leg of the table," announced Jim.

"Well, if you put it that-a way, I guess——" Joe threw out his hands in token of surrender. "Mind you, the notion's yours, all of it, an' you're responsible, no matter what happens."

"Just so. Don't you worry, Joe. I can trust you more than you trust yourself. I'll leave out three bottles of whisky for nine days, making a third of a bottle for each day. That's your allowance—not a drop more.

Help me now, and I'll see that you can bathe in the stuff all next winter at Edmonton if you're fool enough to want to do anything of the sort. Come along! Let's pack and eat, and I'll be off!"

Thenceforth, during a strenuous couple of hours, that outlying post of the Hudson Bay Company was a scene of industry. Stores were checked and vouchers initialled until Mosquito Joe announced that he was prepared to hand over to Parke's permanent successor such and such quantities of pelts and goods. Markwa, of course, stoic and fatalist, simply did as he was told. At last, long before noon, the three men shouldered the belongings of the out-going deputy assistant agent and made for the canoe still moored to its rock.

It was not for the half-breed or the Indian to question the decision of a white man who represented the all-powerful company. They knew nothing of the torment smouldering in his soul. Indeed, living as they did on the very border-line of actuality, they might have scoffed had they known why their "boss," as they called him, had changed his mind so quickly. One minute, while the Indian was crossing the threshold of the hut, Jim Parke was all for ignoring the existence of the Hon. John Bridgnorth Panton, yet the next, when Markwa retreated, he was even more definitely committed to the tribulations which unquestionably awaited the return of his other self to civilised life.

And why was this? Simply because, in the effort to collect his wits after having scared away the Siwash with Macbeth's despairing cry, he had turned to glance at a calendar hanging on the wall merely to verify the date and make sure that there still was time to take effective action in behalf of that which he valued far

more than his threatened inheritance—the happiness of a girl whose memory was the only fragrant remnant of a broken career.

The calendar, one of those rather crude productions spread broadcast by a missionary society, showed a month on a page and gave a Biblical text for each day. This outcast from his fellow men prized it because by marking every date he could keep track of time. Not often did he trouble to read the accompanying text; now, in the effort to concentrate on the problem which had been thrust upon him so unexpectedly, he read and re-read the printed words.

Yes, without doubt this was “Wednesday, June 3rd.” For no assignable reason—probably a haphazard choice of the compiler’s—the text assigned thereto was

“Save me!”

from the first verse of the 71st Psalm.

He took the words as a veritable appeal from Eileen Grant, the delightful child of sixteen whom he had last seen standing disconsolate on a windswept corrie in western Inverness.

Surely it was worth while to suffer that she should be rescued. The text, the date, the coming of the newspaper, these things seemed to constitute a direct message from Heaven itself, a command permitting of no dubiety, no faltering. From that instant he would follow the open road of duty, no matter whither it led. He did not know what was to be done, how he should act. “Get busy” was the password of Canada. It should serve now, if ever.

So, while the Indian packed the canoe with due regard to the distribution of weight, Jim Parke glanced around at the smiling solitude which had given him a home during nearly five years. Existence had not been al-

together unhappy there. A man had to fight to live, but the effort was worth while.

Would he ever see Moose Lake again? It was hard to say. He had bidden what seemed to be an eternal farewell to scenes far dearer, yet the whirligig of time was bringing him back to them. Perhaps it might be so with the far-flung territory of Northern Alberta. It had given him sanctuary once. It might be willing to receive him yet a second time.

He stepped into the canoe after a farewell handshake with Mosquito Joe, and was sitting on his heels in the stern, paddle in hand, when the dog sprang in after him.

Here, then, was the first real difficulty of many he would be called on to tackle in the near future—what was to become of Spot?

The pair eyed each other, the one doubtful, the other sedate and confident. And, of course, the one which knew its own mind won.

"Yes," said the man. "You come right along, pup! I can't claim a heap of friends in this world, and it'll feel good to have a real pal handy when the trouble begins."

CHAPTER II

A DISTANT STORM

PARKE and the Siwash beached the canoe at Bison Pool, the nearest sub-station, on the Thursday evening. Including seven portages, one of nearly a mile, when canoe and baggage had to be carried in two journeys, they had done sixty miles in a day and a half, mostly upstream in the rivers, and helped only by an occasional lake.

The sub-agent at Bison Pool disapproved strongly of Mosquito Joe as even a temporary deputy at Moose Lake. He refused to appoint a substitute, referring Parke to a higher official at Athabasca, this being the time-honoured expedient known all over the North American continent as "passing the buck." However, he made amends by supplying a couple of horses early next morning, one to carry the traveller and the other his belongings. Thence a made trail, soon developing into a road, led to Athabasca, into which small but progressive backwoods town the weary cavalcade walked late on the Sunday.

Spot had to be carried ingloriously over the last forty miles. His paws, inured to ice and snow and rock and brushwood, could not withstand the constant friction of a hard road. His distress was pathetic. His pride was hurt. Not yet did he realise that he was beginning a new life.

He recovered his normal good spirits, however, when

he limped after his master into the spacious hall of an hotel, the gathering-ground nightly of nearly every man in the place, and an enterprising Chow, seeing his condition, dashed forward to easy victory. Parke had some difficulty in rescuing the Chow alive, and forthwith refused offers for Spot rising from five dollars to thirty. It might have been an instance of sound common sense had he sold the dog then to someone who would treat him well, but common sense was not, in the free speech of the North-West, Parke's "long suit." Spot and he had started together on a strange quest; they might even end together; whatever happened they would not be separated by barter.

The telegraph office was closed for the night, but that did not matter greatly, since a clear week began next day. Parke, after greasing Spot's paws, spent the best part of an hour in composing a cablegram. In its final form it read:

Lord Mountford, President, Probate Court, London.—Regarding your decision in Oban Peerage case April 28th. John Bridgnorth Panton is alive and now on way home from Northern Alberta. Will cable you again before sailing.—John Bridgnorth Panton.

It was of set purpose that he introduced his full name twice. The risk of mutilation was reduced thereby almost to zero. That was a trick he had learned while dealing with messages transmitted from point to point along the Western Front.

Luckily, the Moose Lake storekeeper difficulty was settled early next morning, a man keen on shooting being ready to step into Parke's shoes for the summer, at any rate. All other matters would be arranged at

headquarters in Edmonton, for which amazing place a train was available. By this time Spot had to submit to the indignity of a leash. What between the sight of seeming myriads of dogs and a multiplicity of strange objects such as automobiles, horsed vehicles, and the ever-changing crowds in the streets, he was in such a state of stupefaction that he might have been bitten with impunity by a snub-nosed Pekinese.

The fast-moving train put the crown on the husky's experiences. He simply curled up and went to sleep. Thenceforth he accepted civilisation as though it were a blizzard—an annoying thing which had to be endured but which would come to an end some time soon. His master believed afterwards that Spot never really regarded himself as in decent surroundings until he scented grouse and deer on a Scottish moor.

So it came to pass that the biped was more surprised than the quadruped when they entered Edmonton. Panton, as he may be known henceforth, had not seen the town for five years, and in that time it had passed from the corrugated iron to the chiselled stone stage. He did not recognise the very offices of the great company he served. Where once had been huts now stood mansions. If this were the ratio of progress throughout the province Moose Lake might soon boast a hydro and a golf links.

Thus far, Panton had met with no vexatious delays and no real official drawbacks. It was rather bewildering, therefore, to find that no one knew him, that the resident manager on whose help he had counted was far away at Ottawa engaged in some parliamentary business, and that an underling who condescended to listen for a minute had no counsel to offer save a negative one.

"There's no sense in any fellow walking in here and saying he is James B. Parke, of Moose Lake," he explained. "You've got to be franked by the sub-agent at Athabasca. When he O.K.'s you we'll look into your business. Till then there's nothing doing."

Argument was useless. Panton, alias Parke, went out and consulted Spot on the side-walk.

"We're up against it, pup," he said. "The fact is, neither of us looks altogether respectable. That coat of yours needs clipping, and my canvas suit is just about as convincing as striped stockings and a jacket stamped with broad arrows would be in Piccadilly. We haven't much in the kitty but we've got to change our rig."

Spot wagged his tail. He liked to be talked to. Whatever master said was right, and he signified the same in the approved way.

An hour later, the Hon. John Bridgnorth Panton was more like his real self, though his stock of ready cash was reduced to a few dollars. At Moose Lake he had no use whatsoever for printed or minted money. All transactions were in kind. He had even forgotten what salary the appointment carried.

Once more he returned to the company's headquarters. This time he was received less doubtingly, but again met the blank wall of negation. Then he bethought him of the power of the Press, and sought the office of a newspaper. Here was a different atmosphere. A news-editor scented a first-rate "story," and put the stranger into the hands of an interviewer.

"We're starting something to-day," said the journalist gleefully. Never was prophet more justified! Never did prophet realise less accurately the ultimate effect of

any paragraph distributed throughout the English-speaking world!

"And now," went on the scribe, "I'll run you out in my car to see Leslie, who is deputising for Forbes. It'll be a treat to watch his face when he hears your story. But he's a hard-headed Scot, you know. Have you any proofs of your identity?"

"Which identity—that of Moose Lake or of Inverlochtié?"

"Well, both."

"As to Moose Lake there must be scores of 'statements' and vouchers here in my handwriting. Straight off I can name twenty. The other part of the affair—my heirship to the Barony of Oban and to my aunt's legacy—cannot be determined here. But, if photography is to be relied on, you can see who I am not only from the picture in the newspaper but from my likeness to Lord Oban."

"Your father?"

"Well, yes. If he were not my father there could be nothing in my claim."

It was a peculiar answer, but the newspaper man had sensed a mystery already.

"This lawyer, Mr. Harvey, K.C., hints at a family dispute," he said. "Do you care to say anything about that?"

"No."

"Just 'No'—full stop?"

"That's it."

"Well, well. . . . By the way, that's a fine dog of yours. You're not taking him with you, I suppose?"

"I am."

"But you can't. He'll be put in quarantine for six months in England."

"He and I will jump that fence when we reach it.
. . . Won't we, pup?"

Spot smiled. "Watch me!" he said, in effect.

"I'd give money for that dog," said the other.

"He's not for sale. He has been my constant friend, day and night, for three years. I don't know how many times he has saved my life. You wouldn't like to put a price on a pal of that sort, would you?"

"Well, no. Let's hit the pike for Leslie."

Panton's new friend was peculiarly useful. Few other citizens of Edmonton that evening could have brought him straight into the presence of the temporary head of the Hudson Bay Company.

The great man was going out. He was in evening dress, and his daughter, a very pretty girl of twenty, was with him when the visitors were announced. In the conditions Spot was ordered to remain in the car, guarding a parcel which contained Panton's canvas overalls, knee boots, and other more intimate garments which he had discarded.

Mr. Leslie was cautious, though obviously impressed from the outset.

"Inverlochtie?" he said, with apparent irrelevance, when the newspaper was displayed. "Just where is Inverlochtie?"

"Ten miles east of Mallaig," said Panton eagerly. "You reach it by boat or coach, unless you use your own car. It's about as inaccessible as any place on the West Coast of Scotland."

"Ay. I mind it weel."

For a second the Scot's love of his native land had conquered prudence. But the slip was promptly rectified.

"You see, Mr. Panton," he continued, "you come

here with an extraordinary story. It is my duty to check it to the best of my ability. Of course, in the office to-morrow it will be a simple matter to determine whether you are the James B. Parke who has represented the company at Moose Lake. I do not deny that I have heard of you already. Any man who elects voluntarily to remain in such a post without relief for five years is by way of being a bit of a celebrity, shall I say? But it is an altogether different matter when you claim to be the missing heir to the barony of Oban. Why did you change your name? Did you come out here under a false passport? How will you satisfy the authorities in either Eastern Canada or the United States that you are genuinely entitled to the issue of a new passport? Why have you allowed this long period to elapse before you took steps to regularise your position? These are the first questions that occur to me. There must surely be many others, all equally difficult to set aside, even granted satisfactory answers."

Now, five years of loneliness had taught John Panton to think clearly and speak plainly. Some men might have lost ground in both respects, but a steady purpose in life, plus that invaluable habit of memorising whole passages from Shakespeare, had carried him triumphantly through a fierce ordeal. Each minute back in civilisation was giving him more poise. Even his ready-made clothing was already sitting more comfortably on his limbs.

So he laughed pleasantly.

"I haven't the least doubt that the law will set all sorts of traps for my innocent feet," he said. "But I must take the risk. I suppose the President of the Probate Division, Lord Mountford, can order me to be brought before him in chains occasionally to give

evidence. He seems to be a decent old scout. Anyhow, he has given me this chance, and I'm not dodging it. The fat's in the fire already. I cabled him from Athabasca this morning, and our friend here has broadcasted some of the facts to the Press."

Mr. Leslie allowed himself to look surprised, though secretly relieved that the initiative did not rest with him.

"Ah," he said, "that changes the situation entirely. Your appearance in the Probate Court will be only a matter of form, as your own people will testify that you are not an imposter."

"My own people would cheerfully hang me, sir. That is why I came to Canada as a stoker in a tramp steamer, and jumped the ship at Montreal. Somewhere there in a boarding house I may dig out an old war-time passport. I left a box of papers behind when I started out West. May I explain that I am not going home because of the money and my reversionary interest in a Peerage? I want to save that girl Eileen Grant from marrying my first cousin, the worst scoundrel now unhung."

Miss Maple Leslie, who had remained silent thus far, though following the conversation with a most intelligent interest, broke in now.

"Dad," she said, "we shan't be out late. Why not give Mr. Panton a room here for the night so that you and he can have a long talk when we come home?"

"I have a dog in a car outside," said Panton, before Leslie could answer, or, at any rate, before he had weighed the pros and cons of admitting an utter stranger to his house at a moment's notice.

"Oh, that's all right," smiled the girl. "The stables here would accommodate half a dozen elephants."

"But, unfortunately, Spot ought to sleep in my room until he becomes better acquainted with his surroundings. You see, he was born and has lived all his days at Moose Lake."

"Well, there's no difficulty about that so long as he does not scare the maids."

"You two seem to have arranged things satisfactorily," decided Leslie. "Suppose we leave it at that, Mr. Panton. My daughter and I must really rush off now, but the housekeeper will see to your comfort. What do you say? Shall we find you here on our return?"

So it was settled that way, because Panton was not disposed to admit that he could ill afford to pay even a moderate hotel bill.

When Mr. Leslie and his daughter entered their waiting car the daughter was the first to tackle the real difficulty.

"Of course, you're just a wee bit doubtful, dad, as to the wisdom of seeming to support a man who may be an adventurer," she said. "Somehow, I feel that the Honourable John Bridgnorth Panton had told us the truth. I don't think you are making any mistake in backing him."

"But I have done nothing of the sort, May."

"Oh, yes, you have. You agreed to his being our guest. You know perfectly well that you believe his story. And you were right. Shall I tell you why? I have seen English papers of a far later date than the one which caused all the rumpus, and I happen to remember that the marriage of Panton's cousin and that girl, Eileen Grant, is fixed for to-morrow, Tuesday, June 9. I didn't want to make him miserable to-night by telling him, because he cannot do a thing to prevent it. But

you may be sure there is no blunder. I recognised the picture he showed us. It was reproduced, only in a larger size, in the society journal which announced the date of the wedding, and I was interested on account of Miss Grant's good looks, together with the fact that she would become Lady Oban owing to the disappearance of the right heir. Perhaps all the kinks may straighten out in the long run. And anyhow, what has Eileen Grant done that is particularly good for the soul of John Bridgnorth Panton? I should worry."

That last enigmatic comment seemed to strike Mr. Leslie dumb. He literally did not speak again until they reached their friends' drawing-room.

It was indeed only too true that about the time Panton finally went to his room, after a long talk with his chief in the presence of a most sympathetic listener in Maple Leslie, the girl of his dreams was waking in far-off London to a day which, in ordinary conditions, should be the happiest of her life. Yet Eileen Grant was not happy. She was almost convinced that she would never know another hour of real happiness. She was about to marry a man of means who was also heir-presumptive to a Peerage, but, when she rose from her bed in her father's house in a small street off Eaton-square and raised the blinds to let in the morning sun, she glanced at a mirror and shook a disapproving head at her own reflection.

"You're being rather horrid, Eileen," she told herself. "Within three hours you'll be walking up the aisle of St. Margaret's, Westminster, with the fixed purpose of promising to love, honour, and obey Alistair Spenser Panton as a dutiful wife for the rest of your born days. Of course, it only means that you will try to do these things. You may fail. I certainly cannot

vouch for you. But you must play the game. There is no sense in advertising to all the world that however willing you may be to obey the said Alistair Spenser Panton you simply loathe the idea of either loving or honouring him. Come, now, pull yourself together, and carry your head high. After all, there is no one else. If only poor John had lived! Indeed, if only I knew for certain he was dead!"

She sighed deeply, but the time for tears was past. She had given her word, and her father had been strangely insistent that the wedding should take place without further delay. Nor could she plead honestly that she did not know her own mind. She was twenty-three years of age, and it had been settled ever since she was a child that she was the predestined mistress of Inverlochtie. True, the accepted scheme was that she should marry her childhood's sweetheart, but he had gone away after having done something so dreadful that his name was never mentioned by anyone, not even by his own father. And that was nearly seven years ago. Never a word had come to her again from the gallant young Highland gentleman who was ever in her thoughts, while, within a few days, a judge of the High Court would make legally effective an opinion already expressed—that Lord Oban's son was dead, and that his cousin, Alistair, must succeed to all his rights and privileges. It was hard on Eileen Grant that the succession should include her as a bride!

But her father was adamant on that point. His estate marched with Inverlochtie for twenty miles or more, yet both had been impoverished for the best part of a century; even to-day, when better conditions obtained, the one could hardly survive without the other. An eccentric will made by Lady Bridgnorth, the only

wealthy person in either family, tended to complicate matters until the order of the court was secured. Now the way was clear, and Eileen must wed Alistair.

So, with a resignation which the fashionable gathering at St. Margaret's took for the self-reliant attitude of a thoroughly modern young woman, Eileen was married to her somewhat corpulent Alistair, and cut the wedding cake with smiling composure, and received the congratulations of half the aristocracy of Scotland at the reception which, by arrangement, was held at a big hotel in the West End of London. At last the bride, who certainly looked most charming in her wedding attire, was free to hurry to a dressing-room where she would change her clothing for a four hours' run by car to Cromer, where the first part of the honeymoon was to be spent.

A maid from her own rather small house was in waiting with all manner of trunks and dress-baskets, some of which were to be strapped on to the roof and back of the limousine, while others would be disposed of later when Mr. and Mrs. Panton took up residence at Inverlochtie, which Lord Oban meant practically to vacate in their favour for that year.

Of course, this young woman, who had known Eileen since she was a child, being, indeed, only a year or two older, was voluble as to the bride's good looks and the success of the ceremonial generally. But, like lightning from a summer sky, came one stupefying statement.

"What a pity it is, miss—I beg your pardon, I mean ma'am—that the wedding could not be put off till Master John came home!" said she, stooping to lock a trunk in which the satin and Brussels lace and orange blossoms had been carefully packed.

Eileen caught her breath, but contrived to say calmly:

"Master John? Are you dreaming, Maggie? Master has not been heard of for years, and it is supposed that he died before the war ended."

"Oh, but he didn't miss," came the ready assurance. "It's all in the papers this mornin'. He's alive and well in Canada, and is comin' home to claim his rights."

An ice-cold hand seemed to clutch Eileen's heart, but her upbringing had made it part of her very life that no subordinate should be allowed to witness her tribulation.

"Are you quite sure of what you are saying, Maggie?" she inquired, and her voice was so well under control that the maid little suspected what torment her words had caused.

"Oh, yes, miss."

"Did you yourself read this to-day in a newspaper?"

"Yes, miss. Indeed I did."

"Do you think you could get a copy of that paper now, or of any paper containing a similar paragraph?"

"I don't know, miss—ma'am—but I can try."

"Oh, hurry, hurry! Never mind that trunk. It can be closed and locked afterwards. Don't fail me now, Maggie. I must know the truth before I go away. You see, it means so much to one's future—at Inverlochtië."

Maggie, a trifle scared by the storm she had raised, went out, and it was just as well, because Eileen had to struggle hard against a very definite inclination to drop on the floor in a dead faint. Possibly she succeeded in warding off some such collapse by inflicting on herself a physical rigor almost hysterical in its fierce tension. At any rate, she kept her senses, and was able to read and understand a cabled synopsis of the startling

news despatched from far-away Edmonton the previous afternoon.

Like responds to like. Just as John Panton had decided in the twinkling of an eye to brave every sort of contumely if thereby he could serve this girl, so now did Eileen resolve that never, never would she come under the sway of the man who had striven so long and unceasingly to supplant her lover.

With all the clarity of a woman's intuition she realised that both her father and her husband must have conspired to keep her in ignorance of the real facts in regard to the missing heir. Very well. They must be taught that she was not a child to be hoodwinked at will.

"Maggie," she said quietly, "it is rather important that Colonel Grant should come here as soon as possible. I must have a few words with him, and with him alone. That is to say, I do not wish to see Mr. Panton until we send for him. Please get hold of my father and give him that message, will you?"

CHAPTER III

A STRANGE HONEYMOON

A MAN may have the reputation of being a martinet but it does not necessarily follow that he will display in a crisis those qualities of fortitude and self-control which he exacts from others. If, when his own test comes, he is conscious of a departure from the accepted standard of honourable dealing, he will probably be far more conscience-stricken than the happy-go-lucky fellow who pleads that "he did it for the best" and expects sympathy rather than condemnation from the person he has injured.

It was so now with Colonel Grant. He was not quite sure why his daughter wanted him so urgently, yet he entered her room with a most disagreeable knowledge that he understood at last how some wretched delinquent felt when haled before him in the old regimental days. He tried to conceal unease by an assumption of genial impatience, and did not even close the door.

"What's the matter, Eileen?" he cried, with a weak imitation of a smile. "There's not much time, you know. Everbody is waiting downstairs, and you ought to make a start in ten minutes or less."

His daughter's manner puzzled him. She was pale, but showed no other signs of distress. Rather was she calm and completely mistress of herself.

"Please shut and lock the door and give me the key," she said. "I shall not detain you long, but our talk must not be interrupted."

He obeyed with an implied protest.

"For goodness' sake, child, what has gone wrong?" he demanded.

"Everything, I am afraid. Since when, father, have you known that John was alive?"

"John? Are you alluding to that blackguard, John Panton?"

"Suppose, for once, you answer my question straightforwardly. Or are you really unaware that he is living and actually on his way home?"

"Who the devil cares where he is?"

"So you *do* know. Did you get the information from this morning's newspaper, or were you told earlier?"

Colonel Grant hesitated. In very truth, he was so taken aback that he could not find words. He wanted badly to rage and bluster, but a certain shrewdness of mind warned him that this would be the worst possible course.

"Look here, Eileen," he began, "what earthly use is there in——"

She stopped him with a most disconcerting air of command.

"There is certainly no use in argument," she said. "I ask for facts, the plain truth, and you refuse to give them. Very well. I must assume that you, and Alis-tair, and Lord Oban, and Heaven alone knows how many other folk classed as gentlemen, not to speak of those of my own sex, whom I have regarded all my life as friends, have entered into a conspiracy of silence against me. It says here"—and for the first time the sorely perplexed colonel saw a newspaper which Eileen had purposely hidden under a wrap thrown over the back of a chair—"it says here that John cabled the

President of the Probate Court early yesterday from some place in Alberta called Athabasca, whereas the Canadian Press did not get hold of him until much later in the day. I am losing faith in men, but I still have a shred of confidence left in the uprightness of our judges, and I am sure Lord Mountford did not lose a needless moment in communicating such a vital thing to those interested. So Alistair and Lord Oban and you knew yesterday, and all the world knows this morning, that which was wilfully withheld from me—withheld till too late."

Then Colonel Grant lost his temper. He swore loudly.

"How does this infernal business concern us?" he stormed. "If the fellow has been slinking in some obscure den for the best part of seven years why should we bother our heads now because he chooses to come out into the open? He is after his aunt's money, of course. And how can we be sure the whole affair is not a hoax, an imposture?"

Her eyes blazed into something perilously akin to contempt.

"You are so sure it is nothing of the kind that you dared not say one word about it to me because you knew I would never have married Alistair while John lived. That Alistair should act like a sneak and a liar does not surprise me at all. John always said he was utterly untrustworthy and unscrupulous. But it hurts—oh, yes, it hurts cruelly—that my own father should be equally base, for it is shameful that I should have been trapped into to-day's marriage. I wonder if that clergyman knew what was going on when he spoke of the sacrament of matrimony. Can that be sacramental which is founded on deceit? Oh, no, no—a thousand

times no! If one thought that, what would there be left of all that is good and noble in life?"

By this time the colonel was a thoroughly frightened man, though his fear arose from dread of outraged convention rather than any sense of wrongdoing.

"I say, Eileen," he bleated, "calm yourself and stop all this nonsense. If you don't, what is to become of us—with a crowd of people waiting downstairs to see you off?"

But his daughter was by far the calmer of the two. Her colour had returned while she uttered that impassioned protest, and she seemed to realise suddenly that the situation called for action, not words.

"Of course," she said with a detachment that was phenomenal in the circumstances, "I cast off Alistair Panton now and for ever as a husband. I refuse to acknowledge myself as his wife. Ah, me! I knew before the vow was uttered that I could neither love nor honour him, though I would have tried to obey. I would indeed, for your sake—for the sake of the family which I thought both you and I held dear. Well, that is done with," and she drew her wedding ring off her finger and flung it in the fireplace. "I am not Mrs. Panton—not yet. I revert to the state of single blessedness—whoever first coined that phrase was, indeed, a philosopher. All I ask you to decide is this: Am I to walk out of this hotel under a ban, as my darling John left Inverlochtié seven years ago, or do you permit me to go home and bury myself in the Highlands until my own true man comes to claim me?"

Drowning men, they say, clutch at straws. The colonel caught at one now.

"Something must be done," he cried in a voice tremulous with anger and despair. "Oban forbade me to

speak and I must obey. But you shall listen to *him*. Yes, by gad, you shall! Where is Maggie? She must be somewhere near. Where is she? Open that damned door, or I'll smash the panels with a chair. Or hand over the key, unless you want to make me take it by force."

Eileen smiled wanly. Her father was whipping himself into a fury or he would neither have used such language nor threatened her with physical violence.

"If you wish to create a scene I certainly shall not stop you," she said. "But please do try to understand that I am more than ready to meet Lord Oban and his nephew. Perhaps, if we four get together, I may at last hear something of the truth."

Eileen herself unlocked the door, summoned the maid, and gave the message that brought the other men hot-foot to the room. Meanwhile she stood staring out of the window. In the street beneath a small crowd had collected. A splendid car, Lord Oban's wedding present, waited near the porch. Press photographers were taking up strategic positions for a final snapshot of the wedded pair. Eileen was not only noteworthy as the prettiest bride of the season, but the hint of romance about the succession to the Peerage had its widespread appeal, while public interest was greatly stimulated by the news from Edmonton published that morning.

She believed her father spoke more than once, but his reproaches and protestations were meaningless in her ears. She was neither callous nor rude; for the time being she was stunned.

She had not long to wait. Alistair entered first. He was a good-looking man of thirty-five, one who wore his clothes with distinction. The morning coat, striped cloth trousers, glistening boots, and exquisite *bouton-*

nière of a bridegroom had suited his portly figure better than the lounge suit of travel now de *rigueur*, but his appearance was still that of one born in the purple and accustomed all his life to be among the elect. His hair was thinning over a domed forehead and his eyes were slightly too close together, while his mouth and heavy chin hinted at strength of character which might be tainted with some disturbing elements of cruelty and sensuality. But that impression, if it were conveyed ever so slightly at first sight, was dispelled the moment he smiled. He had a most agreeable voice and his manners were those of good society. Were one told that he had been on a headquarters staff during the war and was now a member of Parliament and vice-chairman of a county council the description would not be questioned.

"Eileen, my dear," he said, advancing with outstretched hands, "what is it? Are you ill, by any unfortunate chance?"

"Do I look ill?" said the girl, grasping the back of a chair in such wise as to interpose a barrier between them. Of course, such a man could not fail to note her action—and ignore it.

"No," he admitted, glancing then at Colonel Grant, who seemed to have aged five years in as many minutes. "Have you two quarrelled, or what?"

Lord Oban, a white-haired and frail replica of that stalwart son of his—a son rather content with life now that action was imminent and who, about that very time, was telling Spot he was a lazy hound who had taken too readily to a soft bedroom carpet—had noticed the open newspaper. Possibly he recognised the very page.

"You two were mistaken," he said, apparently rather

gratified by his prescience. "You ought to have told Eileen last night. I believe I understand her better than either father or husband. She believes now we have humbugged her, so it is absolutely futile, while she is in a bad temper, to try and persuade her that we were really considering her more than ourselves."

"Had you no consideration at all for John?" said the girl.

The elderly Peer stiffened as though a set of steel rods supplementing his bones had suddenly become taut.

"You can hardly have forgotten, Eileen, that I requested you many years ago not to mention a certain name in my presence," he said.

"Oh, damn you and your certain names!" broke in the colonel, who, perhaps, could deal with men more skilfully than with women. "Come off your high horse for once, Oban. Eileen has just declared that she means to act as though to-day's marriage had never taken place. Look where her wedding ring is—lying there in the grate. She gave me the alternative of allowing her to return to Glen Inver alone or seeing her walk out into the street, bound for God only knows where. There is one way, and one only, of saving the situation. You, John's father, must tell her why he disappeared seven years ago."

The baronial laird of Inverlochtie had never before been spoken to so rudely by his friend and neighbour. He was gathering his forces for a crushing retort when Alistair Panton intervened.

"At least," said the bridegroom suavely, "we need not storm at one another. Anyone can see that Eileen takes this affair very seriously. So do we all. I wish now we had shared our responsibility with her. But we

did not. Apology at this moment is simply ridiculous. The mischief is done; let time be the healer. I, next to Eileen, the person mainly concerned, am willing to help in every way. Here is my suggestion. Let Eileen and me start in the car, bag and baggage, as though bound for Cromer. Once clear of the hotel I undertake to drop her at her own front door and efface myself effectually until the day when she herself, knowing everything, and not judging me by one unfortunate incident, sends for me. There need be little gossip and no scandal. It is our affair exclusively. Let us keep it in our own hands."

Never was fairer offer made by any man whose bride wanted to desert him almost at the church door. But Eileen's soul was like a mirror which had been tarnished by some destructive acid. Its smooth bright surface was not to be restored by a few plausible words. Deep down in her consciousness she knew she had been deceived, was still being deceived, and that Alistair was incomparably the greatest offender of the three.

"It is for me to dictate terms," she said coldly. "Lord Oban, why do you not do as my father asks—tell the truth, and the whole truth?"

The man's pinched, pallid cheeks flushed and his worn eyes sparkled.

"By God, and so I shall!" he cried, almost shrilly.

"Uncle," broke in Panton, "I advise you most strongly to let this unhappy incident end here and now."

"To the devil with you and your advice!" came the fierce defiance. "You would not listen to me yesterday—neither you nor Grant—why should I give in to you again? Now, Eileen, mark my words, because I pray God I may never be called on to utter them again.

My son, Captain John Bridgnorth Panton, a Highland gentleman of unstained lineage, was dismissed from His Majesty's service for cowardice in the field. It was only by a miracle he escaped being shot—by the mistaken kindness, in fact, of a general officer who happened to be a cousin of mine. There was a second charge, that of drunkenness, bad enough, but not wholly unpardonable. The other I shall never forgive or forget. I love you dearly, as you well know, but if you were to marry my son now I would endeavour never to hear your voice or see your face again in this world. There are offences, I am told, which women are readier than men to condone, but I cannot believe that a woman reared in the traditions of our people is prepared to overlook conduct of that sort in any man, be he husband, lover or son."

Eileen had turned deathly pale during that heart-breaking statement. It was quite impossible to question its accuracy. Many circumstances, hitherto vague and perplexing, rushed into her mind now with overwhelming conviction. So that was what John meant when he said "Good-bye," having met her, as he thought, by chance, on the day he left Inverlochtiel!

"It's for keeps this time, little pal," he had said. "Don't fret about me. I was always a bit of a fool, and now I'm something far worse. You must not even try to remember me. I'm just a rotter and a wash-out. If you want to be kind never mention my name to anyone. John Bridgnorth Panton is 'napoo.'"

She was a girl of sixteen, he hardly a man, though holding a captain's rank and a veteran of many battles. He used the *argot* of the hour. It was very convincing, very pathetic, altogether final in her ears. And now, at long last, she knew what it all meant.

The three men thought she was about to faint, but she waved them back while she gripped that friendly chair to steady herself. When she spoke, her utterance was rather staccato, as though her tongue and palate were feverishly dry.

"There has been enough trouble already in your family, Lord Oban, that I should not seek to add to it," she said. "Alistair, I am ready to go with you to Cromer, but—I am sorry to have to make the stipulation in front of witnesses, even close relatives like my father and your uncle—I cannot be your wife until—until this dreadful affair—is cleared up."

Panton, whose red cheeks had become blotchy, bowed.

"I shall honour the bond," he said.

Meanwhile, another father and daughter were discussing that amazing waster, Jack Panton, in a more friendly way but with exceeding frankness. Knowing her father better in some respects than he knew himself, that curiously named young person, Maple Leslie, had gone early to his dressing-room and demanded admission.

"You and I dad, have got to hold a board meeting before we go down to breakfast," she announced, seating herself in an easy chair while Leslie continued to lather his face.

"Have we?" said Leslie.

"Yes. Don't talk, or you may swallow some soap, and then you'll be too angry to listen. No matter what happens to-day you must be careful not to blurt out a word about that marriage arrangement I told you of last night. . . . There! Didn't I warn you? Yes, I know perfectly well you are not one of the blurting-out sort. You're the closest old thing ever when it comes

to the company's business. But, this is different. I like that young man, and I believe you like him too. He reeled off a straight story last evening. Of course, he concealed the reason why he left home, but I shall be the most surprised girl east of the Rockies if he ever did anything really disgraceful. Besides, he was only twenty-two when he vanished off the map in so far as the British Isles were concerned. He must have had a hard time before coming West, and life has been no bed of roses for him since. I've a sort of notion that he has made good, like many another ne'er-do-well, who had to choose between Canada and starvation. Some day he will be a real lord, with a good-sized wad of his aunt's money tucked away in his pocket-book, or wherever lords keep their cash. So I'm quite sure you will not be making the least little bit of a mistake if you give him the glad hand. He——"

Leslie thrust the shaving-brush perilously near his daughter's very pretty lips and slightly tilted nose.

"One other word from you and I'll gag you with this," he growled.

"But listen, dearest. I know I'm only a girl, and my brains are—what do you call it?—immature. In any case you'll act as you think best and wisest. But two heads are sometimes better than one, and, young as you are and will be for ever and ever, I have the point of view of twenty, which differs from that of forty-nine."

"Fifty-three, you deceiver. What did you say your name was? Maple? Someone erred at the font, or may be the minister didn't like the sound of Delilah."

"I'm dead in earnest, dad. Anyhow, let me ramble on. Mr. Panton will need money. Take a chance, and back him. He will have even greater need of re-

liable friends. Why not send him straight to Uncle David, who, as you often say, is not only a first-rate lawyer but a straight one? No harm in that, is there? Uncle David will soon let you know if our Moose Lake assistant-factor is a pheasant or a jay. Besides, I shall be at Wimbledon early next month, and I'll keep you posted, never fear. . . . Yes, I can guess what's on your mind, but don't say it. If I were a fool I couldn't possibly be your daughter, and dear old Mum always vowed we were like as two pins, not in face or figure, since I must tell the truth, but in character and temperament. I'm not going to throw myself at the head or the feet of any young man, lord or no lord. But this is an extraordinary affair, and I think we ought to be in it, if only to see what happens. . . . All right! It's not much of a cut, anyhow. The thing to remember is—oh, *all* right! Breakfast in ten minutes, and I'll see to the toast myself. It was all dried up yesterday morning."

On the lawn in front of the house, John Panton and Spot were going through a distinctly amusing performance. The man called it "Jerks," and the dog seemed to enjoy it, because he carried out a series of gymnastic exercises with the utmost gravity and skill. The girl watched them, herself unseen, for many minutes. At last, when Spot tried valiantly to twist like his master in that supposedly beneficial contortion known to all ranks of the British Army as "swayin' from the 'ips with the awms 'eld a-kimbo, the legs strite, an' the feet well apawt," she laughed so loudly that the two heard. Instantly Panton said: "'Tchun! Dismiss!" and Spot indulged in a vigorous scratch.

"Oh, please don't stop!" cried Miss Leslie. "What a darling dog! And how clever he is! Just imagine his

trying to do a difficult thing like that. It's hard enough for us, but for *him!*"

"You've had a shot at 'Jerks,' then?" said Panton.

"Yes; only in a school for young ladies it's called calisthenics. The swank name doesn't make it any easier. Can you do that one where you run in a circle leaning on one hand?"

"Yes. Can you?"

"I should smile. Bet you I can get round quicker than you."

"No bet. I have to cover a much larger circumference. But let's try."

The girl won easily, though she fell over at the second effort when she saw Spot grimly holding down a forepaw as a pivot and hopping on his hind legs.

"Oh, this is killing," she gurgled. "If you two are ever hard up for a meal, give a show in the nearest park and you'll rope in dollars and cents."

A gong sounded from the entrance hall.

"Gee, whizz!" she shrieked, striking off at a lively pace. "That's breakfast, and I've forgotten dad's toast. You'll be ruined if it's hard again this morning."

Panton did not attempt to fathom this cryptic remark, but, as Mr. Leslie was slightly delayed, and the toast from an electric appliance on the table was just right when he came in, it lost all significance.

At any rate, the meal was a pleasant one, and the talk dealt exclusively with the coming season's prospects in the fur trade, though the great company's business had become much more general of recent years owing to the springing up of new communities in territory once sacred to the trapper and the trapped.

Spot having graciously consented to remain with his hostess, Leslie took Panton to headquarters, and, within

half an hour, the latter had not only proved that he was veritably the James B. Parke of Moose Lake, but discovered, to his very great surprise, that he had a sum of two thousand five hundred dollars to his credit, being the unpaid balance of five years' accumulated salary.

This sum he regarded as ample for his needs during the next few months. Acting on Mr. Leslie's advice, he left for Ottawa that afternoon. There were many difficulties to be overcome, especially in regard to a passport, but Leslie believed they could be arranged if tackled the right way. Panton took with him letters of introduction to people in the Canadian capital and in London. Among the latter was one addressed to "David Leslie, Esq., Braeside, The Common, Wimbledon," and he was particularly enjoined to take no further step in regard to his inheritance until he had consulted with this gentleman.

"Uncle David is a dear, and an awfully clever old boy," confided Miss Leslie, who herself drove Panton and Spot to the station. "Don't you do a thing without his say-so. Dad pretends that the judges ask him to dinner when they're really tied up over some point of law. He may even help you about Spot, though everybody says your poor bow-wow will be sent straight to prison for six months."

"Hear that, Spot?" said Panton, turning to look at a contented dog enthroned again on the back seat.

Spot yawned loudly.

CHAPTER IV

IN LONDON

SPOT and his master had a miserable journey across the prairie provinces of the great Dominion. The dog's troubles began at once; he had to travel in the confined quarters set apart for his kind, and Panton could only see to his food and water supply and give him a little exercise at long intervals. But the man was fated to undergo the greater tribulation. In a newspaper bought at Winnipeg he found a brief account of the marriage!

It was, of course, the mere accident of the association between the heirship to a Scottish Peerage and a wholly insignificant employee of the Hudson Bay Company that caused the Canadian Press to publish details of the ceremony at St. Margaret's, Westminster, which otherwise would have passed unnoticed. The Winnipeg journal reproduced the Inverlochtie photograph, so Panton had the wretched experience of seeing once more the recent picture of Eileen and Alistair and his father, together with his own more ancient presentment. At first he yielded to blank despair. He remained in the train simply because he could do nothing else, the next stop being several hours ahead.

The Pullman car attendant noticed him and consulted the conductor. The latter, a kind-hearted fellow, came and inquired if he could be of any assistance.

Panton was seated with bent head and shoulders humped, his hands clasped, and arms resting on his

knees. He was staring blankly into the void, yet a soul in pain looked out from his deep-set eyes. He gave no heed till the official touched his shoulder and repeated the question.

"I'm not ill, if that is what you mean," Panton said dully.

"Well, pardon me, son, if I'm buttin' in," went on the other, taking the opposite seat in the section, which happened to be unoccupied. "I only want to help, an' you do seem as though somethin' had shook you up good an' hard. What about a tonic? I have a bottle of Scotch handy."

"That will not minister to a mind diseased."

Panton was hardly conscious of the words he uttered, but the conductor thought them curiously apt.

"That's just where it might touch the spot," he urged. "You come along o' me. It'll do you no harm to rouse yourself an' talk, anyhow."

"If I drank any hard liquor now I might go mad," said Panton slowly. "But you may be right about talking. You've probably seen much more of life—real life, that is, than I. Tell me this, then. Suppose you had started for England to marry the girl you loved, and who loved you once upon a time—a girl who certainly had not forgotten you—and you discovered from a paragraph in a newspaper that she had been cheated and hoodwinked into marrying a man whom you believed to be the author of nearly every mischance which had befallen you, what would you do?"

The conductor weighed the point.

"I guess I've got to think back about thirty years so as to get that proposition from the right angle," he said. "Well, if that had happened to me then I'd

go straight an' see the girl, an', if she was agreeable, I'd kick the other guy round the block, an' take her from him, an' not all the Acts of Parliament in the Law Library at Ottawa would stop me. That's how I'd ha' felt then. But now, my brown hair havin' turned kind o' whitish, I'd advise any young friend of mine in them circumstances to stop right here in Canada, an' keep his eye peeled for another girl. It 'ud save a heap of trouble."

"I'll chew on that for a while," said Pantton, raising the ghost of a smile. "Anyhow, I'm much obliged to you. It *has* done me good to hear your voice, and my own."

The conductor had noticed the newspaper, of course. Elsewhere on the train he secured a copy. He could not fail to detect the likeness of the "missing heir" to the dejected man bound for Ottawa. Then he whistled, and used the appropriate words, but, being quite a decent citizen, kept his knowledge to himself.

All that day and long into the night Pantton tried to peer into the future by the light of what had gone before. As he grew calmer his ideas became more fixed. Regretfully, but with due regard to the verities, it must be recorded that the course he favored was one which no treatise on ethics would have recommended. He had put his hand to the plough and would not turn back. He would go home, claim his legacy, and make himself thoroughly objectionable to all and sundry members of his family. He did not ask himself what would happen when he met Eileen and Alistair. Why bother one's brains about developments which would certainly be altogether different in fact from anything planned in imagination? But vengeance in some form he would exact, with no more

mercy than a stoat shows to a rabbit. His own sufferings would not matter at all. He might expect to be ostracised by every man and woman of his own class who recognised him, and he would never consent to be taken up by friends to whom his money alone would supply an "Open Sesame!" But he could make those others cringe, too. He could humble their pride, lower their social status, daub them with some of the Flanders mud which encrusted him.

Thus and so did the spirit of revolt suggest the way. Oh, he would light a torch in Inverness which would flame through Mayfair and Belgravia. First secure the means; then strike with blind ruthlessness.

Spot was a thoroughly disconcerted hound when next he was allowed to stretch his four legs alongside the train. It was bad enough to be cooped up in a rumbling and shaky box for an interminable time, but far worse to find master suddenly stricken with care. Why, life had not been one-tenth as cheerless the night they were snowed under in the open and had to take a chance in the lee of a rock that next morning they would be able to crawl forth into the light of day once more. What in the world had caused this change of mood? Did master, too, dislike his box? Now if only a marten or a hare, or even a squeaking rat would run out from under those hot and nasty-smelling houses that moved, there would be something doing, and this fit of depression might pass.

Panton had retained his newspaper, and at breakfast he read again that unhappy paragraph. There was no gainsaying its accuracy. It was the logical outcome of the earlier proceedings in the Probate Court. He saw now that arrangements for the wedding must have been made a good deal in advance of the application

to presume the heir's death as from a date nearly seven years ago. The postponement of the actual order in its operative form probably took both families by surprise, but they had thought fit not to defer the ceremony. Thus far he had little to carp at, but when a man has been robbed successively of reputation, rank, income, and the love of a desirable woman he is not inclined to analyse the various stages of the process; rather does he view the net result in its final significance, and from this standpoint one sinister figure, that of his cousin, Alistair Spenser Panton, stood out clearly in every phase of his downfall.

This discovery, if not quite new, had never before been so dramatically definite. It was, of course, the marriage which supplied the fifth act, the culmination to a long-drawn-out tragedy. John Panton found himself longing to sink his fingers in Alistair's fleshy neck. Gloating over the very prospect of such a balancing of a one-sided account, he actually examined the man's photograph with a calculating eye. Yes, the years had added tissue which was not muscle. The "Asp" would wriggle most satisfactorily!

He looked at his father. Lord Oban was frailer and thinner, but that was only natural. Married rather late in life, he was nearly forty years older than his son. A younger brother had taken unto himself a wife long before; thus it came about that Alistair was John's senior by six years. The laird of Inverlochtié was still erect and stately. A true Highlander, he might have stepped out of the frame of more than one ancestor depicted in the family portraits.

Then the derelict member of the clan forced himself to study Eileen. The slim, boyish, straight-limbed girl with the laughing eyes and the tangled hair, the

girl of twelve who kissed him farewell when he went to France, himself well under age for a commission as he was in his first year at Sandhurst when war broke out; who had welcomed him and taken a tearful leave of him during the all-too-rare homecomings while a dreadful struggle followed its blood-stained course; who, in that ghastly hour when he left Inverlochtié for ever, had waited, white-faced and frightened of she knew not what, to kiss him for the last time, only to be sternly repulsed—well, here she was, a woman, a gracious, delightful and altogether wholesome type of the British aristocracy at its best.

Breeding will tell. Colonel Grant was a well-born man, and his wife had come from a house which numbered dukes and earls among its progenitors and present descendants. Eileen was now at the beginning of her decade of real loveliness. The tomboy high spirits had softened into femininity. Her slimness was that of a perfect physique. Once they two had climbed the 4,000 feet of Ben Nevis together and she not only held with him to the summit, but beat him in a mad race down the ridge of stones which marked the line of the telegraph cable from the observatory to the shore of Loch Eil. He was not so sure that she would not equal that record to-day, though his sinews were toughened by five years of a hard life.

He forced himself to put away even the crude newspaper reproduction of her charming face. He feared lest his purpose might weaken. Indeed, finding the page in his pocket when next he went to liberate Spot, he threw it deliberately into a receptacle for rubbish.

At Ottawa he met with no great delay. He had the luck to find an old passport, made out in his proper name, in the trunk he left behind at Montreal. Un-

fortunately the clothes it also contained were useless. He had broadened out in those seven years, of which two were passed on farms and the remainder at Moose Lake. It was the talk of the home-coming Canadian soldiers which drove him finally into the wilderness. It did not hurt him at all to become James B. Parke, a hired man, but the stories of Festubert, of Hill 60, of the Hindenburg Line—these and the like cut him to the quick, because it was not in human nature that he should refrain from some comment which showed that he too had been “over there,” and this brought the inevitable question:

“What was your regiment?”

He could have answered and none would be the wiser, but that way madness lay.

The Ottawa officials recommended avoidance of the fashionable ships sailing from New York, and the advice chimed with his own desire for privacy. Soon, therefore, he was in a Canadian liner bound for the Clyde.

The good folk who travelled with Panton were the cheaper class of tourists or business men. There was not a Debrett or “Who’s Who” in the ship’s library. The mild nine-days wonder caused in Great Britain by the “Oban Peerage Case” had not lasted nine hours in Canada. To the best of Panton’s belief not a passenger in the ship recognised him as the missing heir.

Indeed, Spot was a much more note-worthy personage than his master. That remarkable hound began by being lamentably seasick, but the weakness passed and thenceforth he owned the ship. Certain regulations were framed for the control of dogs on board, but Spot could not read them, disdained the feeble protests of small fry like deck stewards and quarter-

masters, and went straight to the fountain-head of authority by hob-nobbing with the captain. He was graciously affable with every lady passenger who wanted to pat him. He offered a friendly paw to all such, and would fetch and carry an india-rubber ball for any small child who was not afraid of him. When he and Panton did "jerks"—there is no error in the given priority—a crowd would gather. Soon a class was formed. To the great delight of all onlookers the two or three ranks which paraded in the waist of the ship would pitch into a confused heap when an unexpected roll came in the middle of a difficult exercise. Spot was always up first, and barked joyously when the audience laughed.

People stopped offering to buy the star performer, but many were the anxious inquiries as to what Panton would do when Spot was taken from him and put in quarantine, a fearsome ordinance as between owner and dog, but a most beneficial law when the ravages of hydrophobia are borne in mind.

Panton had a stereotyped reply.

"The kindest thing anyone can do is to forget all about Spot once we land," he said. "He has been given six months' imprisonment so often since we started out east that if the sentences were consecutive he would be doing time for the remainder of the century."

Although he meant to hoodwink the authorities if possible, he had no cut-and-dried scheme in mind. He knew from old-time experience at Dover, Folkestone, and all the Channel Ports of the war period that the law was strictly enforced. Bribery would not serve. Any kind of collusion by a member of the

ship's crew was not to be thought of, as, if caught, the offender would be fined heavily and lose his job.

"We'll just trust to luck, pup, and leave it at that," he told Spot, and Spot indicated that such was the true philosophy of the North-West.

So the good ship rolled across the Atlantic, sped round the north of Ireland, did her twelve knots through the glorious, the unmatched, as many believe, panorama of the Clyde, and was summarily reduced to a crawl when a dense fog settled over Greenock. Tenders crept out through the gloom, and crept as carefully back to the quay and the Customs sheds. Panton kept a tight hold on his friend, and brought him to the fore part of the small vessel, choosing the least obtrusive place he could find near the outer rail when the mooring ropes were made fast. Waiting until the gangway was clear of crowding passengers, he lifted Spot in his arms, dropped him quietly into the sea, and signalled that he was to swim straight ahead. That was a mere bagatelle for a dog which would cross a lake and scare a bull moose out into the open. Spot vanished.

His master strolled past the busy Customs counters, had his passport stamped, satisfied watchful eyes that he was not carrying an atom of baggage, hurried along the quay until he came to a boat stairs, and emitted a shrill, long-drawn-out whistle. In a remarkably short space of time a dog's head, cutting an arrow in the surface of the smooth water, came out of the gloom. A hearty shake or two got rid of most of the surplus moisture collected during a three-hundred-yards paddle, and the two sneaked furtively into the town, both well aware that they were culprits, because Spot modelled his behaviour on his master's in all essential things.

For a long time thereafter two battered pieces of luggage—a tin trunk and a raw-hide bag—reposed unclaimed in the Customs shed at Greenock. They bore the orthodox labels of a first saloon passenger who wanted them on the voyage, but the name of the owner had been accidentally obliterated. Probably they are in the store yet. Their contents are of small value, and this was certainly a case to which the old adage applied, that sleeping dogs should be let lie.

Of course, the law-breakers avoided all trains which might convey the ship's passengers to their several destinations. Once in Glasgow, they were fairly safe. To make assurance doubly sure, they did not travel direct to London, but took the roundabout route by way of Edinburgh. And now, lest a record which must deal mainly with grave and remarkable occurrences should become a story of the dog's career, it may be taken for granted that where John Panton was Spot was never far distant. The four-footed adventurer must bulk large in the recital, because, as shall be seen, he could never be ignored as a factor in his master's life. It need only be taken for granted that he was housed and fed. Indeed, on certain unavoidable occasions he attended to both matters for himself.

In leaving Glasgow Panton turned his back on the road to Oban and Mallaig. He hungered for a sight of the moors in the height of summer, but thrust aside temptation. His earlier rage had seethed down into a dull glow of resentment, a mood far more difficult to placate and something so remote from his normal characteristics that it suggested the action of corrosive poison on a healthy substance. Perhaps this un-Christian spirit had been strengthened unduly by a search of the newspaper files in the Edinburgh Public

Library. Here he found two references to himself. The President of the Probate Division, whose fairness had already smoothed the way for the lost heir, had summoned Mr. Harvey, K.C., to court, and communicated to him and to all whom it might concern the cablegram received from Athabasca.

Counsel took the news with marked scepticism. He respectfully submitted to m'lud that the message might be a fabrication.

"Of course, that is possible," agreed Lord Mountford. "In my opinion at the moment it is perfectly genuine. However, the sender promises to communicate again from the port of embarkation. I shall let you know if he does so."

Panton had duly cabled from Montreal, and again "The Oban Peerage" figured in the newspapers. This time Mr. Harvey was ready for the fray.

"Of course, I need hardly point out to your ludship that the claimant must prove his identity beyond dispute," he said. "There are circumstances connected with the past life of John Bridgnorth Panton which render his voluntary return to this country most unlikely. It is not by any means merely a matter of succession to a legacy, which could have been determined quite easily on the other side of the Atlantic——"

"Need we go into that to-day, Mr. Harvey?" broke in the President. "I see that the sender of the cablegram expects to be in London on or about the 25th instant. That gives him plenty of time to appear before the court. If he is delayed by circumstances beyond his control, and communicates with me, I shall certainly defer the operation of the rule until after the date fixed originally—namely, the 30th."

"If your ludship pleases," said counsel.

It is, perhaps, an unavoidable element in the administration of the law, especially in civil cases, that advocates should apparently remain blind to all points of view other than their client's. The judge, of course, restores the balance of equity, but anyone like Panton, who knew nothing of courts, could hardly fail to assume that Mr. Harvey and his myrmidons were prepared to make him out an imposter if they possibly could, and, in any event, to publish far and wide the sordid details of his long-forgotten downfall, details which had sunk into immediate oblivion during the hectic days of the British advance through Flanders and Belgium in 1918.

This belief, not so well founded as he imagined, hurt. He did not flare into a passion. Rather did he smile grimly, and the smile boded ill for the folk at Inverlochtie, or wheresoever else they might be in the near future.

In glancing through the files he came across an account of the marriage. He read it from beginning to end, noting particularly the names of all who attended the reception and donors of wedding presents. It did really seem that Eileen that day had been in tune with "The Voice that breathed o'er Eden." In her case there was nothing to forgive. She had heard no word of him for seven long years, and he himself had bade her forget. But Alistair—that ingratiating rascal—he must be made to pay some sort of heavy reckoning. If only he had not married Eileen, Cousin John might, indeed, have claimed Lady Bridgnorth's legacy, but he would have gone far out of his way to avoid a scandal. Now he was bent on raising one. He was almost glad that his enemies, including, alas!

his own father, were seemingly ready to meet him more than half-way.

He went straight to a telegraph office and sent a third message to Lord Mountford. It was then Wednesday, June 24, and he undertook to present himself in court on the Friday. Luckily, he allowed for his own complete ignorance of legal procedure and wanted one clear day in which to consult the "eminent" lawyer, Mr. David Leslie, according to the description given him by his niece, Miss Maple, of that ilk. Panton was prepared to trust any member of the Leslie family. They had been friendly when friendship was sorely needed.

So he and Spot reached London late on the Wednesday night and were refused admission to three hotels on the ground that dogs were not allowed in bedrooms. A fourth opened its doors. Early next morning Panton bethought himself of the telephone. Yes, here was "Leslie, David, Braeside, The Common, Wimbledon." A call was soon put through and a voice which closely resembled one he had heard little over a fortnight ago in Edmonton bade him welcome.

"I've had news of you from my brother," Mr. Leslie said, speaking with a deliberation which was all that was left of a once marked Scottish accent, "and I've followed your progress through various small items in the newspapers. Where are you staying?"

Panton told.

"Eh, man, but that's a poor address," came the surprised comment.

"I cannot help myself. I'm badly dressed, have no luggage, and am accompanied by a disreputable-looking hound."

"Ay, my niece, May, wrote about Spot. Well, well.

Stand fast there till I reach you in an hour's time. I'll have my managing clerk come along, too. He knows London better than most, and there's no use in bringing you to the City until other arrangements are made. How are you off for money?"

"I have four hundred and fifty pounds in my pocket."

"Far too much. You must put the hundreds into a bank. There are worse wilds in London than in Northern Alberta, and you may not be able to take care of yourself as well here as you did out there."

John laughed. He was getting back into close touch with his fellow men. Mr. Leslie meant inviting him to stay at Wimbledon, which would be an exceeding pleasant thing for Spot and himself, but with commendable foresight, the elderly lawyer thought fit to "give him the once over first," as the North-West puts it.

Leslie was as good as his word. He brought with him a sharp-featured little man whom Panton had seen waiting outside the hotel for some minutes. This was Mr. Jenkins, whose knowledge of London rivalled that of Sam Weller. Its extent and profundity soon became apparent. After a brief chat, during which Panton was amazed to find the variety and complexity of the legal proceedings rendered necessary by his failure to claim his aunt's bequest at the proper time, Mr. Leslie went to his office, and Mr. Jenkins took charge of the strangers, man and dog. Shops were visited, and personal belongings acquired. Some were taken away in portmanteaux and suit-cases. Others were left for alterations, prompt delivery being guaranteed, and the address was at Wimbledon.

Mr. Jenkins was a close bargainer, but he did not

buy cheap articles. When he conducted Panton to a bank it was necessary to deposit only three hundred pounds, leaving a balance in hand of about sixty.

"You see, Mr. Panton," explained his Mentor, "clothes go a long way in helping other people to form first impressions. All this stuff is good, and most of it will last for years. Your greatest saving was in picking up second-hand baggage, which also avoids a too new appearance."

"By jing!" laughed Panton, "if I had the two articles I left at Grenock I'd not fall flat on that account."

Thereupon Mr. Jenkins heard the story of Spot's method of landing in these inviolate isles. He enjoyed it.

"You must be a remarkably clever dog," he said to Spot, seated on the floor of a taxi. That polite animal instantly proffered a paw.

"My eye!" cried the surprised Cockney. "He actually understands what I am saying!"

CHAPTER V

A BREAK IN THE CLOUDS

THE wanderers were made welcome at Braeside, Wimbledon, though Mrs. Leslie and her domestic staff were inclined to view Spot with suspicion, seeing that he resembled a full-grown wolf rather than any dog within their ken hitherto. He made a bad start, too, by treeing the household cat. But a stern order from his master put that right, and he was soon promoted to the occupancy of any mat or rug he felt inclined to. Of course there were alarms and excursions on the part of postmen, tradesmen's boys, and hawkers. These soon subsided. The new guard learned quickly to differentiate between callers and intruders.

As the cook said to the upper housemaid, "I hope that there dog stops here. There won't be no burglars prowlin' around this house so long as *he* is about."

The Leslies' two surviving sons and a married daughter were out in the world—the boys in the Far East and the young matron in Birmingham. A brother and sister had been killed in France. Mrs. Leslie, knowing something, though not all, of Panton's story, took him to her heart. He was at home in the place before he had slept a night under its roof.

There followed a period of comparative peace. He appeared only once in court, where Mr. Harvey, K.C., made amends for earlier unpleasant comments by explaining that Lord Oban and Mr. Alistair Panton, the parties to the original proceedings, concurred in the

application by counsel representing the Hon. John Bridgnorth Panton that the record should be withdrawn. There was no hint of ill-feeling or legal hair-splitting. A member of the firm of solicitors representing Lord Oban even gave formal evidence that he knew the heir well, had seen him many times and recognised him at once.

"Is Lord Oban in court?" inquired the President.

"No, m'lud," said counsel.

"Has he met his son since the latter came home after a long absence abroad?"

"No, m'lud. Lord Oban is ill, and hardly fit to travel. I have a letter here, however, in which he offers, if it is absolutely necessary, to come to London and identify Mr. Panton. Meanwhile he has examined specimens of Mr. Panton's handwriting, and is convinced of its genuineness. He encloses certain documents for your ludship's information."

The judge, who had glanced twice rather attentively at the claimant, examined the proffered papers. He was about to return them, seemingly without comment, when John, unversed in the ways of the Probate Division, electrified all present by standing up and saying:

"May I see those, my lord?"

He spoke clearly and collectedly, but was rather abashed by Mr. Leslie's scandalised whisper:

"You mustn't address the court. All questions have to be put through counsel."

Lord Mountford only smiled.

"What do you say, Mr. Harvey?" he inquired.

"I have no objection, m'lud," said the K.C., and it was obvious to every lawyer present that his instructions were specific. At all costs he was to avoid any semblance of opposition. An usher passed the small packet of letters to the man who had written them.

One was the formal demand penned, at Mr. Leslie's dictation, for a definite abandonment of the "presumption" that he was dead. The others were more than seven years old. They were dated, but the only address was "British Expeditionary Force." And they were all inscribed to "Dear Eileen!"

He paled slightly, and looked around to discover to whom they should be returned.

"You recognise those letters, Mr. Panton?" broke in the judge.

"Yes, my lord."

"You take it, as I do, that they were supplied to Lord Oban for the purposes of these proceedings by the person who received them in the first instance?"

"Yes."

John's tone was stiffening. He had not been prepared for this bitter reminder, and he wanted to lash out at someone, anyone, just to relieve the tension. He faced Lord Mountford squarely, and received a second shock. This man was a friend, was looking at him with sympathy and utmost understanding.

"I do not mean to be rude, my lord," he went on haltingly, "but my temper has been tried rather sorely of late."

The judge nodded.

"The record is withdrawn," he said.

Pantons counsel was about to raise the question of costs, but Mr. Harvey anticipated him.

"My clients wish me to say that they will meet every expense to which Mr. Panton has been put in this matter," he announced.

By this time Mr. Leslie had recovered his equanimity.

"By Jove," he muttered, "your turn has set the heather on fire in the neighbourhood of Inverlochtié."

There's a good deal more in this than meets the eye, John."

Never was comment more justified. The shrewd old Scot recalled it many times in later days with great and well-warranted unction.

Action was not so rapid in the matter of the legacy. There were meetings with trustees and accountants, followed by the usual wrangle with the Treasury in regard to succession duties. But Panton was out of the wood. His position was assured. Within a few days he would be a comparatively wealthy man. Yet, at the very moment when peace, not war, was being breathed in his ears a new turmoil arose. One morning, after he had been in England less than three weeks, he received a letter from his cousin, Alistair. It bore the Inverlochtie postmark, and read:

Dear John—I hope you do not imagine that I am wholly responsible for recent events. If you will try and put yourself in my position you will see that I was justified in believing that you must be dead. Seven years is a long time. Neither Eileen nor I have heard from you since 1918. At any rate, if you wrote we did not receive your letters. Again, it was not of my seeking that the courts were asked to presume your death. That was a purely formal thing, engineered by Lord Oban's legal advisers. I may claim honestly to have acted wholeheartedly in your behalf since I knew you were alive. In fact, I insisted that no obstacles whatsoever should be put in your way, and thus, I am sure you will agree, stopped all the rattling of dry-boned skeletons which must have followed the opening up of incidents now, I trust, not only dead but buried in oblivion.

You may, of course, have a grievance against me in regard to my marriage, yet, looked at impartially, my behaviour is blameless, even in that matter. Please do take into account those seven years. Eileen was sixteen when you went away. She is now twenty-three. How long was she to wait in silence? And, now that you are back, would you have expected her to marry you? That is the only hard thing that I have to say. I do not even mean it to be hard, but one must envisage the truth, and the whole truth, when such a serious personal problem is under consideration.

Cannot we meet in London and talk things over? There are many sidelights on the major issues which may not be shown in a letter—at any rate, in a letter which, like this, is shot off into space, without any real knowledge on my part as to how its friendly advance will be taken. I can only assure you that I mean well. I would willingly invite you to visit us here, but that is not in my power. That mere statement shows my own difficulties. In the natural course of events you will be the owner of Inverlochtié, where I can never figure otherwise than as a guest. The situation is absurd, but it exists.

I hardly know why I feel it necessary to explain these things, or why I should suspect that you are not well disposed towards me. But—there it is—I do feel that way, and that is why I suggest a meeting, a long and candid discussion, with every possible ground of offence thoroughly surveyed. In the conditions I shall be very glad of an early reply.

Yours sincerely,

ALISTAIR PANTON.

By mischance it happened that Mr. Leslie was away from home the day the letter arrived. His repute as an authority on the "betterment principle" in land values as affected by public improvements was widespread, and a West-country town which was engaged in constructing a new park and golf links had agreed to arbitrate with local property owners as to the all-important matter of rates. Hence, Panton dashed off his own reply. He might have submitted it to Mr. Jenkins, but shrank from the possibility of being questioned concerning the past. And indeed, the quarrel between the cousins was of old standing and not easy of explanation. There is nothing new in this. The deadliest of family feuds are those which arise from causes no outsider can fathom.

John observed the amenities in addressing the envelope. It was otherwise with the letter itself. He wrote:

Alistair, you plausible scoundrel, I certainly have been longing to meet you, if only that I might twist your neck until that lying tongue of yours would no longer work. If you value your safety, keep away from me. If I choose to visit Inverlochtié, you clear out. I shall ask no man's permission for my comings and goings, but, as advice seems to be the order of the day, this is my tip to you—if you hear I am on the hill-top run quickly down the valley, just as you did on the day you shot a fox and allowed the blame to fall on one of the keepers. I attribute to you all the misfortunes of my life—all, without exception, and you alone know what that means. You know far better, indeed, than I, because you cannot have forgotten, while I, in the worst instances, can only

suspect. My main purpose in life henceforth will be to pay you back in some of your own coin—a de-based currency, but it will serve.—JOHN BRIDG-NORTH PANTON.

In the white heat of the hour John also sent a brief line to Lord Oban. Beginning “Dear Father,” he passed at once into his subject:

I have just heard from that skunk, Alistair, who wants me to meet him in London. Although I travelled six thousand miles for that specific purpose I trust most sincerely now that I may not run across him. There has been enough scandal in the family already that I, at least, should be willing to avoid more, so I do not wish to be charged with Alistair’s manslaughter, if that is what the blotting out of such a rotter would be called.

It is pitiful, of course, that I may leave home again without seeing you, but your decision of seven years ago must stand, and I yet have no word that you have changed your mind. I bear you no malice. Why should I? It is you who have cause to be aggrieved. But I must enter a solemn protest against your action and Colonel Grant’s in forcing Eileen to marry a reptile like Alistair. If I am wrong in this assumption, if you had no hand in it, I ask, as a last favour, that you will take some means of letting me know the facts. Time has seared the old sores. It would be cheerful to have your assurance that there are no new ones.

Then, thinking to walk off the ill-humour induced by his cousin’s letter, he whistled up Spot from the garden, left word for Mrs. Leslie that he would not be

in for lunch, and strode off across the common Londonwards. In two hours he was passing the Oval, where a cricket match was in progress. He was tempted to drop in, if only for the sake of old times, but Spot might not be admitted, so he went on, crossing the Thames by Vauxhall Bridge. Growing tired of pavements he made for St. James' Park, explaining to Spot that if a cat might look at a king a dog might certainly look at a king's palace.

Thus far the pace had been a good four miles an hour. Now he took things more easily. He was aware, of course, that his companion attracted much attention. It amused him to realise that not one person in a hundred thousand met that day could determine what sort of dog this was. Probably most people regarded Spot as a new and large-sized type of Chow.

Two men in particular coming down the Mall from St. James' Palace were greatly taken by him, and, naturally enough, glanced from the dog to his master. Recognition was instantaneous by all three. Panton knew that these were Sir Arthur Frensham and Captain Bathurst, both of the Guards, and, as he expected, after a look of blank amazement, they cut him dead.

At least, he thought so. A flush darkened his face and his eyes swam. Of course, this very thing was bound to happen, but it was none the less unbearable for all that. So he did not hear one of the two running after him until he was roused from a stupor of wrath by the low growl with which Spot warned him of a stranger's nearness. Be it remembered they had passed thousands of people that day, yet this was the first time the dog gave tongue. Evidently, therefore, Spot was aware that this hurrying person wanted speech of his master.

It was Sir Arthur, red and rather flustered, but impulsive as ever.

"Dash it all, Johnnie, isn't that you?" he cried, holding out his hand. "I was told you were in town, but I could hardly believe my eyes when I looked at you just now."

"Your eyes have not deceived you, Sir Arthur," said Panton grimly, and quietly ignoring that outstretched hand. "Don't let me detain you. I see Bathurst is waiting."

"Let him dam-well wait, or, better still, hook it," and the baronet waved his friend on. "I haven't seen you for donkey's years, and I've been wanting all the time to have a word with you. If I knew where to write I'd have sent you a line. The devil take you, aren't you going to shake a paw?"

Panton could not resist that. Their hands met.

"It's good of you, Arthur," Panton said, "but not wise, you know. It's even a trifle hard on me."

"That be blowed for a tale! Hallo, what's this?"

Spot, hearing a familiar phrase, wanted to be included in the hand-shaking, too.

That broke the ice more effectually than any spoken word. Sir Arthur seemed to be genuinely glad to see his old friend and brother-officer, and certainly did not mean to part from him after a mere exchange of civilities.

"Look here," he rattled on, after Spot had been properly introduced, "let's go and have a bite somewhere, not in one of the clubs, which is sure to be crowded, but some quiet place. How about the Carlton Grill?"

Panton laughed at Frensham's definition of one of the most popular restaurants in London. Moreover,

he fully appreciated the tact which excluded the service clubs.

"I admit I can eat right through any ordinary menu," he said, "having just walked in from Wimbledon, but the third member of the party has to be considered. Can't we find some small French café in Soho? I have almost forgotten my London, but Old Compton-street can't be far."

"Just a cock's stride. Let me lead. But how about this noble fellow? Won't he get rattled in a crowd?"

"Not a bit. I really believe that Spot does not look on all these people as real. He was astounded at first. Now he disregards them entirely."

"Well, well. Tell me all about it. Where have you been? In North-west Canada some paper had it. Why on earth should anyone want to live there?"

Panton laughed again.

"You haven't changed a scrap, Arthur," he said. "Northern Alberta gave me a home and a rough sort of welcome when I badly wanted both. Never mind me. Talk about yourself. A major by this time, I suppose?"

"Do I look it? No, my lad. I got my captaincy and then sent in my papers. I'm running a special line of Berkshire pigs in the jolly old home park. Must do something, you know, to pay taxes. I keep Borzois and Alsations, too. Wish I had something to mate with that husky of yours. By gad, I'd start a new class in the Kennel Club."

Frensham's lively chatter was the pleasantest thing Panton had listened to this many a year. It brought back the old happy-go-lucky days when the lights were bright and there was no thought of the morrow so long as a man knew his job and did it. For a little

space he allowed himself to forget. He talked freely. It was ridiculously easy to tell of the glories of the vast North-West without dwelling too strenuously on his own complete detachment from the world. Oddly enough, the rather feather-brained baronet was the first to touch on a difficult topic.

They had reached the coffee and cigarette stage of an excellent lunch and were isolated in a boarded compartment of a Soho restaurant when Sir Arthur said suddenly:

"We must meet again, Johnnie, and have a longer confab; but I've a date at Tattersall's for four o'clock, and just now I want to say something serious. It's about that rotten business at Lille. . . . No, don't get shirty, old top. This is important. You didn't have a square deal, and it ought to be inquired into, even after all these years. I know what I'm talking about. I was in that show and got mine. Couldn't so much as recognise a glass of beer when it was held to my lips for weeks afterwards. Well, you remember—or do you remember?—it was a fine morning but misty when the whistles blew and we went over. Of course, I knew nothing of what was happening elsewhere, but your company was next to mine on the right, and *we* dropped in for a hefty counter-attack after we had gone about four hundred yards. We had to fall back and re-form, and the lie of the land brought us over the ground your company had crossed——"

Panton winced as though an invisible hand had struck his face.

"You forget the one vital fact, that I wasn't *there*," he said thickly.

"Of course you weren't. You were lying blotto in a fire-bay after telling your men you were fed up with

the whole bally war and meant to cut it. Anyhow, that was the yarn that went round, I'm told. . . . Now, just you listen to me. D'ye think I'm such a rotter that I'm saying this for fun? It took us a solid twenty minutes of ding-dong work to hold off Fritzie and straighten the line. Things were just coming right when I found a lance-corporal of your crowd crumpled up in a shell-hole. He was for it soon—very soon—but he knew me and wanted to say something, so I knelt beside him and got my ear down. 'Sir Arthur,' he said, 'somebody ought to speak up for Captain Panton. He hasn't been treated fair. He was doped.' 'What are you talking about?' said I. You see, Johnnie, I was quite in the dark. When a push was on it was 'Eyes front' for all of us, especially when the ladders were raised. 'Captain Panton, sir,' says the lance-corporal. 'He's chucked it. But it's not right. He was doped. I saw it done.' And with that, he straightened out and hopped it. A whistle blew, so off I went with my little lot. I was hit at the next cross-road. First I heard of you was six weeks afterwards in the Rawalpindi Hospital on the coast. By that time the court-martial was over, and you were swallowed alive. No one had a notion where you had gone. But I got a nurse to write to a cousin of yours on the staff—what's his name?"

"Alistair Panton."

"That's the lad. As the nurse received no answer I wrote myself when I reached Blighty. That drew him. His letter sounded all right, but was a trifle smarmy. Said it was unfortunate that no such evidence had been forthcoming at the time, and he feared it was too late now to reopen the inquiry. I didn't like it, so I tackled the War Office. Nothing doing,

thank you. Still, my letter must be in the records of the Judge Advocate-General's Department. Those things are not destroyed. The nurse will remember, too. She's matron of a hospital up in the north. And Cousin Alistair can't pretend he was forgotten. Take my tip and look into it, Johnnie. That poor little blighter of a lance-corporal was telling the truth. Give me your address. Mine's the Bath Club while I'm in town."

Panton murmured something, but the words were inaudible, for his throat was dry.

"What's that?" inquired Frensham.

"I was quoting a verse from the Psalms, Arthur. You've heard it many a time: 'As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.' And you have given me the very thing I wanted—a whip to scourge Alistair Panton with."

"Oh, to blazes with him. And that verse isn't from the Psalms, for it's in Proverbs. I'm a whale on Biblical quotations; I had to be, when I was a kid. And your interpretation is not what is intended by either Proverbs or Psalms. You just set to work and see if you can't clear up this mess. What I've said is not so much to build on, but it's a start, better than nothing. Get hold of one of those private detectives. Some of them are marvels. A pal of mine wanted to get shot of his wife, so he employed a lad of that kind. My hat! What didn't he find out about that woman! You'd never believe there'd be such going on in this gay old burg. Next time we meet I'll tell you all about it. Such a yarn! So long, old scout! Fare thee well, Spot! You get your nose to the ground, too. You never know whose trail you may pick up!"

CHAPTER VI

THE COURT-MARTIAL

PANTON, feeling rather stunned, wandered aimlessly into Shaftesbury-avenue. Then he thought he would sit a while in the Park, and compel his wits to consider this new development from every point of view. He avoided the glare of Piccadilly by taking a taxicab, since he dared not risk meeting any other old acquaintance until the fire lighted in heart and brain by Frensham's curious story had died down a little. If any man had the impudence to recognise yet disregard him in that hour of tumult, he would certainly smite the offender heavily on the nose, a direct method of argument which might imply a somewhat scandalous appearance in quite a different sort of court from that presided over by Lord Mountford.

It was, however, a vain thing to suppose that he could walk or drive through London accompanied by Spot without drawing many eyes. The weather was fine, so the taxicabs hood was down, and the dog, of course, hopped on to the seat beside his master. A large section of red tongue was lolling out as he surveyed the passing throng; his aspect was so bland yet strange that many heads were turned from the pavements and the vehicles met or passed *en route*. The English are a nation of dog lovers, and this comical-looking husky was something new to a metropolitan crowd.

Hence it was not really a far-fetched coincidence that a young lady, seated in a taxicab so packed with steamer trunks and suit-cases that there was barely room for the one occupant, should notice Spot, and, from him, with the wide eyes of agreeable surprise deduce the Hon. John Bridgnorth Panton. Her cab was held up at the junction of Hamilton-place with Piccadilly. It occupied the front row, and Panton's taxicab was among the last to pass before the lines of traffic were changed.

Not without some peril to herself at such a moment the lady leaned out and cried excitedly to the driver:

"Did you see that cab with the dog inside? Well, step on the gas and catch up with it! Pull alongside, and I'll do the rest."

The chauffeur nodded; such variations were good for trade, owing to the extras. It needed some manœuvring to obey orders. Panton's taxicab turned suddenly to swing into the new stream coming from Knightsbridge, so the pursuer had to cross in front of an omnibus and endure some scathing comments which classed his social status as something much beneath that of a blood-coloured costermonger. In the result the two taxicabs drew to the curb simultaneously at Hyde Park Corner.

John Panton was paying the fare when the lady sprang to the pavement.

"Just imagine!" she cried joyously. "Who'd have thought I'd see you and Spot bowling along Piccadilly five minutes after I had reached London!"

Panton contrived to get his hat off.

"Miss Leslie!" he cried in sheer astonishment.

"Well, you haven't forgotten me! Neither has Spot!" because the dog was the first to offer a polite

paw. "You're staying with Uncle David, I hope? Yes? Well, don't say you're too busy to take me to Wimbledon. It'll be a real joy to see Aunt Louie's face when I turn up with you. For the first time in her dear old life she'll suspect a plant. Because, don't you get it? I'm not due till next week. At the last moment a good kind soul in New York grabbed and reserved a vacant state-room in the *Mauretania*, so here I am, meaning to surprise Wimbledon, but I never hoped for a success like this. You're coming, aren't you? Sure! Hi, you"—this to the chauffeur—"go straight ahead to Waterloo! We'll follow. You see, John—I've simply got to call you John after meeting you in this way—I've just arrived at Paddington from Plymouth. Of course, I've telegraphed, only ten minutes since. I forgot all about it till then. Well, you *are* looking fine and dandy. London is sure the only place for men's clothes. Please don't say I'm a sight. Everything is wrong—hat, costume, stockings and shoes—every blessed thing! But wait till I get my breath. I'll take care then that the Canadian flag flutters gaily in the breeze. Dad was a darling, and gave me a real draft. But you haven't even yet said you are glad I'm here."

"I'm delighted," said John. "Some emotions are too deep for words, you know. And you are looking charming. As for any loss of breath, it is not noticeable."

"Ah, you've come on a bit since you reached home. Everything is O.K., the wireless said."

"Nearly everything, thanks to you and your father."

"My goodness! What did *we* do?"

"You were friendly when I was in real need of friends. I shall always remember your kindness, Miss Leslie."

"Oh, is *that* it? So I may *not* call you John?"

"Indeed you may, especially if it means that I have the privilege of addressing you as Maple."

"Nix on the Maple. It's all right as a name in musical comedy, but May for mine."

"All right, May. I can foresee wrinkled brows at Wimbledon, but what matter?"

"Don't worry. I give Auntie spasms twenty times a day, but I believe she likes it. She thinks I'm a scream. Of course, she doesn't put it that way. She says: 'My dear, you are so impulsive. The vicar is coming to tea to-day, and I do hope you will not startle him.' The joke is that the vicar eggs me on. He laughs at every word I utter."

"Evidently the Church has broadened out a bit since the war."

"Now what do you mean by that? John, you're never going to be cynical and sarcastic, I hope?"

"I? Why, I was only trying to approve of your vicar."

"Well, say so, and cut out that one-act-play line of talk. Of course, you've gotten over the shock of your cousin's marriage, and are now going to settle down into a sensible and well-to-do heirship to a baronetcy. Or is it a barony? I never can remember the difference."

It's quite easy when you know representatives of both orders. Just before we met I parted from a baronet, Sir Arthur Frensham—a splendid chap. We must arrange a date. You'll probably like him better than the vicar. He used to be one of 'the boys,' but now breeds blue pigs and red dogs."

"Oh, I am so glad to hear you are finding your old friends again."

Panton laughed rather harshly.

"This one found me, if you are referring to Sir Arthur," he said. "He told me something which got the wind up rather badly, so Spot and I were going to squat in Hyde Park until the gale blew over. No, I'm not going to tell you all about it now. It's up to you to discourse. I'm sure you had a good time on board ship."

"Heavenly. I had at least four nibbles, but I wasn't biting. An actor who has been married six times as good as told me I would make an acceptable seventh, so I christened him Henry the Ninth, and he was frightfully peeved, because he's rather fat."

The girl's light-hearted chatter was good for Panton. It stopped him from brooding. Frensham's revelation, nebulous though it was, had raised again the furies which the pleasant life of Wimbledon and the lack of hostility on the part of his father were stilling into quiescence.

Aunt Louie did not live up to the mid-Victorian standard. She was delighted to hear how the two had met in London.

"I always say that the most unlikely things happen in the West End," she vowed. "The other day outside St. George's Hospital I ran into my kitchen maid wearing my best new fur tie, and I was so flurried that the King himself nearly rode over me. A policeman wanted to be rude, but his Majesty raised his hat and was really quite charming about it. And now, children, tea will be ready in a few minutes. The vicar is coming. Mind you don't shock him too soon, May."

Mrs. Leslie was sure it was her adventure with the housemaid and the King which caused shouts of laughter. To add to her placid contentment with life her husband came home unexpectedly, the rating arbi-

tration having closed more quickly than he anticipated. So all was well at Braeside for the hour, and Panton emerged, momentarily at any rate, from the cloud which had darkened the past seven years.

It enfolded him again when he sought a few quiet words with Leslie before dinner. He placed boundless confidence in the lawyer's advice, and resolved to take no further step without consulting him. In fact, he regretted now the impulse which led him to hurry off those two letters to Inverlochtié that morning. He felt, without knowing exactly why, that his far-seeing friend might have disapproved of them, especially of the outspoken message to Alistair.

However, being a candid person, he made no secret of their despatch. He began by reading his cousin's amicable note and gave his own reply, together with the appeal sent to his father, practically word for word.

Leslie listened in silence. At the end he commented only on the letter to Lord Oban.

"I'm glad you wrote in that strain," he said. "There is an honest ring about it. Do you care to explain what the trouble really was which led to this unfortunate break in your relations?"

Panton was ready for the probe now. There must be no further concealment, no covering up of the ugly places.

"Good as you and your wife have been to me I might have refused to answer that question frankly yesterday," he said. "Now it is different. You have not heard yet why I sought this interview, so I am glad you withheld any criticism of my attack on Alistair. I met an old friend this morning and he told me something which may affect my future more than anything else that has happened since I left Moose Lake."

Then he described the meeting with Sir Arthur Frensham, and its strange sequel. The lawyer began to take notes, which Panton regarded as a hopeful sign.

"Let me understand this matter fully," said Leslie. "Sir Arthur's story, though slight, and not to be classed as evidence yet, becomes rather remarkable when looked at in conjunction with your vague charges against Alistair Panton. Had you some such notion in your mind when you penned that letter this morning?"

"No. Honestly I had not. I just laid to his door every evil which has beset my life. I have never ascertained the cause of the horrible collapse in France. It was a sort of waking nightmare. I just seemed to go mad for a brief space. I must have talked and acted like a lunatic. At any other time the affair would have blown over. But in the summer of 1918 the men were getting rather fed up at the prospect of another winter in the trenches. The moral force of their leaders was needed then more than ever. And I was in the very pink of condition, ready to carry on for another four years if necessary. The chap who defended me put forward the plea of shell-shock. It wouldn't wash. Why should it, when all I wanted was to be shot next morning, in which case I might have figured as a casualty, and the truth would never have become known."

"Would not that outcome have proved highly profitable to Alistair Panton?"

"Naturally. The heirship, and, as we are aware now, Aunt Eleanor's legacy, would have dropped into his mouth like ripe plums."

"Hum!"

Leslie took thought for a full minute.

"I hadn't meant telling you until a good deal later," he said at last. "If, however, you promise to wipe any words of mine from your memory, I don't mind saying that Lord Mountford sent for me early this week. He's a first-rate judge and a thorough good fellow in every respect.

"It seems that his son was a Deputy Judge Advocate in France in 1918, and had a good deal to do with your case. The evidence against you was strong and there was plenty of it; yet he thought there had been double-dealing somehow by someone. He could not lay a finger on the weak spot in the indictment, because your junior officers and a couple of sergeants seemed quite distressed at having to appear in court at all. Still, the suspicion that there was something wrong lodged so persistently in his mind that he fought hard against the death sentence, which, as you know, the court was almost bound to inflict.

"Luckily, the Divisional Court proved amenable, and that is how you come to be alive to-day. Recently, seeing the newspaper reports, Mr. Mountford, who has taken sick in the meantime, told his father about the curious impression left on him by the court-martial in France, and Lord Mountford told me. I have been wondering what use, if any, could be made of the incident, and have already set in motion the official process which should produce a copy of the proceedings. In fact, I hope to find the documents awaiting me at the office to-morrow. I didn't want you to rely on any advantageous outcome. Legally speaking, there is no case yet. But inquiry is justified. As to that there can be no manner of doubt. Your friend Frensham's lance-corporal made a specific statement which gives something to go on. Of course, seven years, and

seven such years, constitute a rather awkward gap. But—one never can tell. The law has its romances. This may be one.”

The old gentleman seemed to be thinking aloud. Even when he ceased speaking Panton did not break in on his vein of thought, since he was evidently turning over in his mind some possible development.

“I would be better pleased if you hadn’t flung down the gage so determinedly at your cousin’s feet,” he said at last. “If he wants to be friendly you have choked him off. If he is hostile you have warned him.”

“I can accept no favour at Alistair’s hands, sir.”

“No doubt you know best. Yet—forgive an old man’s scepticism—I cannot quite see why the love affair between you and Miss Eileen Grant should flare up so fiercely after all these years. Is there no danger of its being rather one-sided? She was only a child when you parted.”

“A child of sixteen. Eileen has not forgotten.”

“But she was willing, apparently, to marry your cousin.”

“What else could she do? It is a marriage between two estates—of course, a link which always existed. In our case, fortunately, we were devoted to one another. And she was a child, remember, who had gone through four years of war.”

“Well, well. That element may complicate matters. We shall see. Meanwhile, I have a friend in Scotland Yard to whose opinion I attach great weight. At times his judgment is almost uncanny in its divination. His name is Furneaux and he is an Inspector in the Criminal Investigation Department. I wonder if we can get him here to dinner to-morrow.”

Leslie put through a call on the telephone. After

a brief delay a rather shrill, high-pitched voice answered. Panton could not distinguish what came over the wire, but Leslie laughed as he hung up the instrument.

"Furneaux will join us *en famille* at 7:30," he explained. "You will be surprised when you see him, so I shall not spoil sport by any preliminary description. He is bringing the chief of his department too. An extraordinary pair—the opposite poles in police work, I should imagine, but a combination dreaded by evil-doers. Now ring up Sir Arthur Frensham at the Bath Club. After him I'll try to bag Mountford."

In the result all four men accepted the invitation.

Miss May Leslie was by no means overjoyed when she heard of the projected dinner.

"It's awful mean of you, Uncle, to spring this party on me at a day's notice," she protested. "I haven't a frock to my back. Canada's name will be mud among all these nobles and gentry."

"Being a legal fiction, as you are not supposed to be here until next week, you haven't been considered at all in the arrangement, young party," said Leslie. "None of the men will dress, so frocks will be of the demi-toilette order. In any event, I don't see how your back comes in. It is never covered when you appear in full war paint."

"That's just the point. No one will guess what a peach of a figure I have. A nice artist-man on board the 'Mauretania' told me I had the torso of Venus Aphrodite."

"Were you bathing, or dining?"

"David," said Mrs. Leslie, "why do you tease the poor girl so?"

The good lady felt that she was becoming quite a

wit. The young people laughed at every word she uttered. Even her husband grinned broadly.

Next day was a quiet one. The ladies went shopping, so Panton had some hours to himself. He put the time to good use by sitting under a tree in the garden, notebook on knee, and taxing his memory for a complete and, so far as in him lay, an impartial survey of the incidents of one supremely disastrous morning in France. There was nothing which he could recall whereby its preliminaries differed essentially from scores of other attacks. He made it a point that every man in his company who went over the top should have a good meal about forty minutes before the zero hour, which had been deferred that day from six o'clock till nine, thus giving the sun an opportunity to dispel a dense mist though not leaving it so late that visibility should be good. That order had come down the line after an early breakfast was served, so coffee and bread, with slices of tinned beef, were issued about 8.30 A.M. He himself was the last to swallow a hasty snack in his dug-out, as the company-sergeant-major, a smart fellow named Connington, was worried about an inexplicable deficiency in Mills bombs, the emergency stock being discovered ultimately packed away in an unusual place.

The two subalterns, Molliner and Vere-Davis, were in the trench when he, Panton, passed along. He remembered that he felt a trifle dizzy, and slipped twice unaccountably on the duck-boards, which made him rather angry—absurdly so, indeed, when he knew what tricks duck-boards could play. The sergeant-major was with him and said something silly about cheering up—it would soon be over—whereupon he flew into a rage, though all the time he had a subconscious knowledge he was behaving foolishly. Never

before had he given way to nerves, not even in the dark days of 1916. Then, if the Germans were pushed, more often than not they pushed back so effectively that when actual fighting ceased the balance of ground gained would be in their favour. Now they were yielding. The allied line was advancing rapidly and making good every time. Why, then, should a veteran of countless assaults suddenly go to pieces when undertaking a not particularly hazardous operation which was bound to be successful?

From that point his recollections grew blurred. He had a hazy belief that some altercation broke out between the subalterns, the sergeant-major, and himself, but could not, for the life of him, recall what it was all about.

When he came to his senses he was under close arrest at Divisional Headquarters, miles away. What had happened meanwhile? He learnt only too soon.

No more terrible evidence could be brought against any leader of men. His own officers, non-commissioned officers, and private soldiers supplied it, though the damning facts had to be dragged out of them. Molliner and Vere-Davis were brought from hospital to tell what they saw and heard, each having been hit during the counter-attack of which Frensham had spoken. They had to be spoken to rather sharply by the president of the court before they would admit that in their opinion their company commander was suffering from the effects of either drugs or alcohol. Whatever the cause, there could be no denying the wretched outcome—he had refused decisively to lead his men, and even advised them not to advance if ordered. Finally, when the whistles blew, he threw himself down in a fire-bay and shouted in derision

at the notion that rational human beings could settle a dispute by using rifles, bayonets, and hand grenades.

Company-sergeant-major Connington nearly broke down when called, but his statement was more to the point than that of any other witness.

He surprised the court by saying that, contrary to the general belief, a good many men suspected that the forthcoming attack would be resisted most strenuously. If the British objective were attained, the flank of a whole German Army Corps would be turned, and the general retreat already in progress must be converted into a rout. Therefore, a fiercely fought action might be expected, and casualties would be heavy.

The officer who acted as prisoner's friend seized on this point, and asked how it came about that one non-commissioned officer in a regiment should possess most secret information known only to the General Staff. Connington replied that Captain Panton certainly knew of it that morning, and the matter had been discussed by a group of sergeants overnight. Two sergeants bore out the latter part of this statement. They believed it had come through another sergeant, killed during the fight, who said he had picked up the story from some person unnamed.

Panton himself denied that he was either aware of or had mentioned any such outcome of the attack, whereupon Connington, recalled, admitted he might have been mistaken in that particular, but pointed out that the threatened lack of Mills bombs seemed to disturb his company commander rather more than the circumstances warranted if the "show" promised to be nothing out of the ordinary.

This phase of the inquiry was investigated fully,

but every witness reached a dead end when questioned as to the source of the rumour. It appeared that Connington led the company with great skill and bravery during a fierce and protracted engagement which cost the battalion nine officers and nearly two hundred rank and file in killed and wounded.

That was as far as Panton's acquaintance with the main features of the affair went. He would never forget how his very soul was pierced by the point of his sword extended towards him on a table when he was taken to hear the finding of the court. After that, his life was a blank. He did not ask why he had escaped the death penalty. He crossed the Channel like one whose mind was deranged by melancholia, making straight for Inverlochtié, driven by some vague notion that he must "have it out with" his father.

Now, Major Alistair Panton had taken no part in the proceedings, while on the actual date of his cousin's curious collapse he was fifty miles away, engaged on transport work, in which he was an admitted expert. Of what avail to badger one's brains in the effort to involve him in the ghastly business? John Panton saw the folly of it for the hundredth time, yet some secret nerve urged him to drag Alistair into some nook where no other could interfere and force from him an avowal of guilt even though he should be brought to death's door before he confessed.

John closed the note-book in impotent anger when he saw Maple Leslie approaching across the lawn.

"The gardener said you were here," she said gaily. "You look as though you were enjoying the fine weather, so hop in and be miserable for tea."

"I have just come to the conclusion that I had

better take the next steamer for Canada," he said rising.

"That very idea has been the making of many a man," she retorted. "Anyhow, tea is ready, and you'll probably change your mind twice before dinner. What's given you the hump this afternoon?"

"A careful review of all the circumstances which led to my ignominious dismissal from His Majesty's service."

The girl's bright face paled and her air of banter flew.

"Is that really true, John?" she said wistfully.

"Absolutely true. I may have been more sinned against than sinning, but the plain fact remains that after a full review of the evidence I can only find myself guilty."

For a moment there was silence. Maple Leslie wanted to cry, but forced herself to speak instead.

"Tell me, John, even though it hurts," she said. "Did Eileen Grant believe that of you?"

"Thank God, she never knew—unless Alistair—ah, that is it! That is how he broke her to his will! May, my little friend, if I don't get away from the Old Country soon I shall kill Alistair!"

The answer was unexpected and highly distasteful. May Leslie bit her lip so as to keep that unruly tongue of hers quiet. If John wanted to beat up Alistair, well, let him—it was a way men had. But why couldn't he drive that girl out of his thoughts? What was the use, anyhow?

CHAPTER VII

THE OPPOSING CAMPS

Not many minutes before the first guest reached Braeside, Wimbledon, a young woman came through an open French window of the fine old stone mansion at Inverlochtié, in the Highlands, crossed a paved terrace, and stood near a flight of broad steps leading to a garden. She was in evening dress, but, though to the manner born, or, more likely, because she knew her Invernesshire even on a fine evening in late July, a warm and fleecy white shawl protected her neck and shoulders.

The scene spread at her feet was not to be surpassed in all Scotland for richness of colour and harmonious blend of mountain, lake, and glen. The garden, itself a riot of flowers in full bloom, sloped to a shrubbery which merged into a belt of black firs. Through these had been cunningly thrust a wide strip of turf, spreading a smooth green carpet to the very shore of Loch Inver. At that moment the long, narrow lake reflected and softened every visible tint of blue sky, wisp of cloud, clump of woodland, and purple moor. Never more than half a mile in width, it wandered to left and right until one or other of its tree-clad islands and promontories shut out the view. On every hand were hills draped in heather. Above the saddle of a range directly in front, for Inverlochtié House faced due south, rose the lordly mass of Ben Nevis.

The hour was nearly half-past seven, but the sun yet rode high over the north-western horizon. Inverlochtié is six hundred miles north of London, so the summer night is a brief episode in each full day, and twilight soon mingles with the dawn. The atmosphere was extraordinarily clear. The patches of snow which never melt from the northern crevices of Ben Nevis were plainly visible, though the highest mountain in the British Isles was twenty-five miles distant. In that pellucid air the picture was almost dazzling. An American girl who had the good fortune to see the delightful panorama for the first time on just such an evening in a bygone year betrayed her emotion by saying breathlessly:

“Oh, it is so beautiful that I want to cry!”

But Mrs. Alistair Panton—the Eileen Grant of John Panton’s dreams—was in no mood to appreciate the ever new charms of a landscape always inexpressibly dear to her eyes whether in sunshine or storm. Her gaze was introspective because her troubled thoughts were elsewhere. True, she had gone out into the open with set purpose. Finding herself alone in the drawing-room, since the two women guests at Inverlochtié had not long returned from an extended tramp over the moors, she wanted to ascertain if the men had come up from the loch. A glance at the tiny boat-house nestling beneath a low but steep bank which terminated the turf-covered avenue showed that the launch had not yet returned. This was a matter of little real consequence. Dinner would not be served till eight o’clock, a late hour, but purposely so fixed to provide a break in the long evening. Restless and ill at ease, Eileen had gone to her room early and dressed hurriedly. Inaction was a bane just then.

Even this placid interval before a meal had its own torture. If she dared yield to impulse she would have torn off her fashionable gown of turquoise blue and silver, rushed into riding kit, saddled a horse in the stables, and jogged the twenty miles to and from Mallaig. But the rigid code of social usage had fetters of its own. She was the hostess of Inverlochtié, and might not escape her duties in that madcap way.

Her present trouble was that Alistair had shown her the letter he sent to John. She could not pretend that its tone was other than amicable. There were phrases, one in particular, which struck her as meaning more than the mere words conveyed, but the man whom all the world regarded as her husband stood out stoutly against any alteration.

"I have my personal self-respect to consider as well as John's feelings," he had urged. "I think I have gone much more than half-way toward a sort of reconciliation by writing in this strain at all. I may not be able to accomplish any satisfactory settlement of an unhappy affair for which I am not even remotely responsible, but at least I shall have tried. Really, Eileen, you are not being quite fair. Many a man would have written without telling you. Few would have shown you the actual letter. Yet you cavil at me for setting forth in the most kindly words at my command the real difficulty which the passing years will never dispose of. No, my dear girl—I either post this as it stands or tear it up."

"Will you let me read John's reply?" she said.

"Yes. I warn you it may hurt, but I shall not regret that if it ends a rather intolerable situation."

As usual, Alistair had defeated her. She simply could not argue with him. He was always so punc-

tiliously right, so politely just and reasonable. No man could have been more considerate during their make-believe honeymoon. Even now, when she had taken her place as mistress of Inverlochtié, a position she would hold unchallenged during Lord Oban's life, her husband had changed his tactics so slightly that the difference could be discerned only by a woman's intuition rather than by any exercise of her logical powers. His later manner seemed to suggest that her continued aloofness was beginning to verge on folly. She had read the proceedings in the Probate Division as reported in the newspapers. She knew well it was Alistair's firmness which modified his uncle's fiery refusal of any kind of support to John's claim for recognition. She had heard him reasoning the matter with her own father, who could not help admitting that the wise course was to assist, whereas defiance, which was utterly impracticable, or hostile disregard, which would be bitterly resented, could have only one incredibly stupid outcome—the blazoning far and wide of a forgotten scandal while not invalidating the heir's legal status in the slightest degree.

She was brought into the family conclave because she alone possessed any of John's letters. Alistair did not resent even that somewhat disconcerting fact. Indeed, his attitude throughout had been altogether fine. She was secretly afraid of him. At times she wondered whether she really hated him or was herself the slave of an absurd and untenable prejudice.

So Alistair's plea for a fair understanding had gone to London, and if John took the trouble to answer at once they could have heard from him that day. But no letter came. The post from Mallaig arrived round about two in the afternoon, and Alistair had stayed at

home purposely. After tea he and the other men went on the loch. The indisposition which kept Lord Oban away from the Probate Division seemed to have passed suddenly, since he was able now to cast a fly thirty yards with a heavy salmon rod. In very truth Mr. Harvey, K.C., had toned down his lordship's anger into illness. It was just as well. Had father and son met in open court there might have been an unpleasant, an almost tragic scene.

Eileen was desperately distressed by John's failure to write. He might at least have telegraphed that a letter was on the way. In the depths of her heart she had hoped, during the first week or ten days after John's return from Canada, that he would communicate with her direct. But the silence of seven years remained unbroken. Had he really banished her from his mind? Was there another girl—perhaps a wife? What a blow to her pride, what a reward for her fidelity, if that were so! But in that case surely he would have told her. Her own marriage would supply his best excuse. And no matter what the cause of the quarrel between him and his father and cousin, why should he be bitter against her? Really, that taunt of Alistair's seemed to be justified. On all counts John was behaving badly.

Thus, while her bodily eyes dwelt unseeing on the landscape which had once moved another girl to tears by its quiet beauty, the eyes of her soul were searching restlessly for some way of escape from self-inflicted torture. Still, she was too well acquainted with every feature of life in that remote wonderland that she should fail to notice anything out of the common order of events, and it was certainly strange that the elderly postmaster should now be coming up the drive which

led to the main door on the west front. The house stood nearly half a mile from the tiny village, whose cottages clustered around the head of the loch. What was bringing old Donald Macdonald here at this hour? Not a telegram, because there was no local line, and the people at Mallaig were instructed to use their own discretion if the heavy expense of portage should be incurred in preference to delivery by mail or the occasional chance of some crofter or gillie making the journey late in the day.

Yet, there was Donald. In half a minute he would be at the door, since it was obvious that his errand was not taking him to the servants' quarters. At the same moment she saw the launch heading for the boat-house, but its occupants could not breast the hill under five minutes if they hurried.

So Eileen sped back into the still empty drawing-room, ran down the magnificent oak staircase which formed one of the treasures of Inverlochtie, and opened the door before the postmaster could touch the bell. And he actually had letters—a dozen or more.

"Why, what has happened, Donald?" Eileen cried. "A mail at half-past seven!"

"Ay, ma leddie," said the old man, smiling at the girl whom he had known during all the years of her life. "It's no' an ordinary deleevery, ye ken. An engine bruk doon yon side o' Fort Weelliam, an' there wass a delay o' five hoors. Sc a bit laddie on a bicycle kem peltin' wi' a special bag frae Mallaig, an Ah thocht the folk up here wad like te hae their correspondence the nicht."

"It's very, very good of you, Donald. Don't go yet. I'll ring, and the butler will entertain you for a while."

"Weel, Ah'll no' be sayin' it's no' a har-r-d pu' agin' the collar up til Inverlochtie. But Ah'm thenkin' some o' they letters may be important."

Eileen was already anxious to glance through the packet; her old friend's mysterious air implied that he knew more than he said. Then she understood. After all these years he had recognised John's handwriting. It was not any desire to serve strangers frae the Sooth that brought him up the hill with their letters. Like every other resident in the district he took a keen interest in John Panton's homecoming. The led had been popular among them all, and no man or woman in the glen credited the strange tale of the court-martial. Of course, they could not refuse the evidence of that dreadful paragraph in the *Gazette*. But that John should be a coward—no! That was obviously an invention of some jealous Sassenach.

Sure enough, she found two letters from John, one for his father and one for her husband. Some nerve of irritation twitched because she herself was still ignored. But the excitement of an actual reply being to hand soon dispelled that minor ache. She thought it best to let the butler or a footman act as postman.

The Hon. Betty Bridgnorth, cousin to both John and Alistair, was in the drawing-room when Eileen returned. She was thirty and unmarried. The Pantons were a good-looking family, but Lord Bridgnorth, long since deceased, favoured the prize herd of polled Angus cattle to which he had devoted all his attention. Unfortunately, Betty resembled her father. She was heavy of feature, heavy in weight, but surprisingly quick on her feet. Points excellent in a polled Angus are not so alluring in a woman, however.

"The men are just coming through the wood," she announced. "They have taken their time. Mary and I would have dawdled, too, had we known."

"No matter what we knew I don't believe you could possibly dawdle, Betty."

Lady Lansing, wife of a successful speculator in oil with whom Alistair Panton was closely associated, floated gracefully into the room. She revealed every essential feature of an aristocrat, though her father had been an ill-paid City clerk for many a year. He and his wife managed somehow to feed, clothe, and educate four children in a tiny house at Tooting Bec. When Mary, the eldest, was fifteen she had to help financially by bringing in some few shillings a week earned as, a copying typist while she was learning shorthand. In the office was a smart young clerk, Reginald Lansing. When the two got married, Mary being then nineteen, there was consternation at Tooting Bec. How could they possibly start housekeeping on 35s. a week?

Then came the war. Mary carried on her work with a rubber importing firm. Reginald got himself shot early in 1915, and was honourably discharged from Army and hospital with a shortened leg. Within five years he was a rubber magnate—two years later a knight, and what is known as an "authority." Mary had helped, too. A sister and two brothers were started in life; father and mother were pensioned off; Mary herself became as delicately graceful and languidly self-possessed as any duchess.

"No," snapped Betty, "I haven't got the repose of Vere de Vere. Neither have I the nerve to keep people waiting for their dinner."

"But, Betty dear," said Eileen, "there need not be

any delay. They still have plenty of time to dress."

"I hate clocks," sighed Mary Lansing. "They remind me of my hectic youth. You people don't begin to understand what it means to be awakened by a jarring alarm at 7 A.M., to rush into your clothes and swallow some hot and tasteless tea in the kitchen, and catch a train or omnibus at 8.15 so as to be in the office at 9 o'clock. If you two want to realise how the poor live, go and stand for an hour early one morning at the City end of London Bridge, and watch the hurrying, unsmiling crowd as it passes. It will be a revelation. When I think of that sad procession nowadays it induces a sort of waking nightmare."

"I don't suppose it's a ha-porth worse than hanging around the judging ring in an agricultural show most days during four months of the year," said Betty.

"There are various ways of being bored with life," put in Eileen quietly. "I should imagine that the *ennui* of doing nothing is the least endurable. Are you really happier now, Lady Lansing, than when you and Sir Reginald worked together in the same office?"

"No. Perhaps not. But I couldn't go back to it. Wise saws about the dignity of labour are all very well for those who have never had to work nine hours daily five days in the week and five on the sixth. Reginald vows he will retire soon. I hope he means it really. If leaving the business implies a seat in Parliament, I'll go on strike. Imagine me canvassing a slum constituency! I could astonish some of the women voters, of course, but it would be a loathsome job."

Alistair Panton was the first of the men to look in on the way to his dressing-room. Eileen, wondering if he had yet read Jack's letter, could make nothing of his inscrutable face.

"Salmon are more variable than women," he said. "By all the laws of the game not a fish should have risen this evening. The water is clear as gin, and there is not a ripple on the surface. Yet we have created something of a record for the loch at this time of the year. Oban pulled in six fish, and Lansing four, one an eighteen-pounder. I got seven, but small ones. By the way, do you people know there has been a special mail delivery? Some accident delayed the morning train, and our London letters have just come in."

That was all. Eileen expected that he would ask her to join him in the billiards-room, but he disappeared. When the whole party of seven, for Colonel Grant had motored over from Glen Inver for the afternoon and evening, gathered in the drawing-room, he uttered no word to indicate that he had heard from his cousin. Lord Oban vanished after dinner, and the others played bridge. It happened that the newly-married couple cut out of the first rubber, so Eileen decided to force the pace a little. Drawing Alistair aside, she said that she was in the hall when Macdonald brought the letters, and was aware that John had written. What of it?

"A hopeless business," he said offhandedly. "I promised you should see his reply. Please don't insist on that."

"But I do."

"You will be horribly upset. At any rate, wait until the others have gone."

"I have waited seven years."

"Yes, I know. That is why I think you should be content to dismiss the whole ugly business from your mind."

"Do you refuse to tell me what John has said?"

"No. I only urge, for your own sake, that you should allow me to judge in this matter."

"It must be serious, then. Don't be afraid. I shall not make a scene, if that is your motive."

"Very well. I wish I had not pledged my word. But——"

With a gesture of unwillingness, almost of annoyance, he produced John's letter from a breast pocket.

"Don't blame me," he said. "You were warned."

Eileen took the amazing screed, and read it through twice carefully. She was aware, but tried not to show it, that Alistair studied her face intently while she held the letter under a lamp. When she handed it back she probably surprised the man far more than she imagined by her first question.

"Did you really shoot a fox?" she inquired.

"Yes, by accident," he blurted out.

"Not here, of course?"

"No, it was in a hunting country near Leicester. But does it really matter? What a triviality!"

"What does John mean when he says he attributes to you all the misfortunes of his life?"

Alistair replaced the letter in his pocket.

"I cannot profess to explain anything that John means," he said. "Compare my attitude with his and you have the measure of each. For the rest of my days I shall utterly and completely ignore John Pantton. Where I am concerned, he simply ceases to exist. That is my last word on the subject."

"It may not be his."

"I do not doubt it. A man in disgrace is apt to attribute to others his own wretched qualities. If you still profess to believe that I have left any stone

untuned to establish some sort of *modus vivendi*—well, it passes my wit to understand you. But please do regard my decision as final. Shall we go and watch the game? Your father has just doubled Betty's four spades. It should be interesting."

It would have been vastly more interesting to Alistair if he could have emulated the once-popular Mahatma and "projected" himself at that same hour into the library of Braeside, Wimbledon. He bulked large in the conversation of the six men seated in rather formal manner around a spacious table. Their committee-like aspect was explained by the typed sheets and writing materials in front of each. Mr. Leslie had told his wife and May that an hour would probably suffice for the conclave. Mrs. Leslie, of course, said she was glad, because she had some sewing to finish. May took a mashie into the garden to practice chip shots in the declining light. It appeared that Frensham and she were golf fiends. During dinner he had explained some rigid combination of right elbow and both knees which effected marvels of length and underspin, and May seemed to know what he was talking about.

In the library, Mountford, K.C., was analysing the record of John's court-martial, and supplementing a dry statement of evidence by his own recollection. Frensham listened in sheer wonderment. Never before had he heard what had actually happened in France. Chief Superintendent Winter, C.B.E., executive head of the Criminal Investigation Department, a big, blonde, pleasant-faced man, who looked as though he would be well versed in the prospects and condition of the grouse for August and the partridges for September, smoked a fat cigar in silence and seemed

to be watching its smoke curling lazily above his head. Mr. C. F. Furneaux, Winter's second in command, was exactly half the weight of his chief. His wizened, pallid features might have been carved in ivory by some famous Japanese artist. He had phenomenally bright, restless black eyes. Leslie and the barrister's knew him well, but the two younger men, when he was introduced before dinner, could hardly conceal their surprise, for Furneaux resembled a popular jockey or favourite comedian rather than a detective.

Yet it was he who first realised how John Panton, sucking determinedly at a pipe, was really biting hard on its vulcanite mouth-piece, since the lawyer's dispassionate and logical analysis of the proceedings before the court-martial was as distressing a statement as any man could hear of his own downfall.

"By the way," interposed Mountford suddenly, "does anyone know what has become of Company-Sergeant-Major Connington?"

There was no answer for a moment. Then Winter said:

"It is hardly our business, but we shall try to find out."

"And where, just now, is Mr. Alistair Panton?" went on Mountford.

"At Inverlochtié," said Leslie. "He wrote to John here from that address three days ago."

"Ah," broke in Furneaux. "You patriotic Scots may change your skies but never the names of your residences. Inverlochtié there, Braeside here. What did you call your Canadian log hut, Mr. Panton?"

John's set face relaxed into a grim smile.

“‘The Shieling,’” he said. “The paint was poor stuff, so the first winter washed it off.”

Furneaux grinned too. He wanted this iron-jawed youngster with the set eyes of despair to loosen up a bit.

“I thought so,” he cackled. “Even Paradise is labelled ‘The Land o’ the Leal.’ My worst blunder in life is that I did not contrive to be born in Peebles. Then I might have become a really great man, and have a statue erected to my memory.”

“But why?” protested Winter. “What other reasons can you urge? And where is the prize idiot who ever dreamed of a fly cop’s statue being erected in Scotland Yard?”

CHAPTER VIII

COUNCILS ARE MAINLY WARLIKE

A SMILE ran round the table, but Leslie alone understood what a favourable sign it was when the "Big 'Un and the Little 'Un of the Yard," the nicknames by which these two were known and feared by the underworld of London, began to twit each other in public. While they talked they thought, and their mental activity bore no sort of relation to their speech. Evidently they had fastened on some special point in the evidence, but he forebore from questioning them. It meant, at any rate, that they would help, if possible, and the friendly co-operation of the C.I.D. might be of incalculable value in avoiding the traps for the unwary which must abound in an uncertain inquiry of this sort.

Mountford called the court to order by holding up a hand.

"Judging by the great majority of the statues I see scattered around London I cannot imagine any reasonable human being seeking posthumous fame in that grotesque shape," he said, thus proving by a proper display of legal humour his fitness to adorn the bench in due course. "It seems to me now, as it did at the time, that sufficient heed was not paid to the strange fact that a non-commissioned officer should possess information denied to his immediate superiors as to the importance of this particular attack . . . As a

matter of form, Mr. Panton, may I ask if at any time during the intervening years you thought you might have modified your own evidence in that respect? Remember, you were suffering from the severe mental strain of such an inquiry. When that was relaxed your mind would work normally. These lapses occur to all of us. How often do we recall, probably with intense annoyance at our forgetfulness, something of which we had previously expressed blank ignorance?"

"No," said John decisively. "That loophole is closed. I can remember the simplest incidents of that morning, as well of the preceding night's discussion in the German dugout we were using as a mess. We all imagined we would be taking part in a rather humdrum advance. In fact, without exception we shared the opinion that the enemy's line in our immediate front was not strongly held."

"That's right," agreed Frensham. "I remember being quite surprised when Fritzie put up a real show. Just about that time he began to lose his punch."

"Yet it is clear that an apparently well-kept secret of the General Staff had become a matter of common knowledge among the sergeants. Strange! Now, what is the technical side of the alleged shortage, or mislaying, of the Mills bombs?"

"So far as they were concerned it was immaterial whether the enemy resisted seriously or gave way at the outset. Once the men got into the German trenches the Mills bomb became all-important. It was practically the only effectual means of clearing dug-outs and machine-gun nests. No company officer would be worth his salt if he did not make a fuss when less than half the proper supply was on hand."

"Were you surprised when the missing bombs were found?"

"In ordinary conditions I would not have given another moment's thought to it—then. Of course, someone would have been hauled over the coals for the mistake afterwards."

"What exactly do you mean by 'in ordinary conditions'?"

"Well, one blundered through, you know, when things went right. In this instance, I began to feel nervy just about the time Connington reported the shortage. From that moment I passed from bad to worse. Within ten minutes I was insensible."

"Has it never occurred to you that you might have been drugged?"

"Of course it has, scores of times. If I didn't believe that I would not be here now."

Somehow, the very tone of John's voice implied that he would not have lived.

"Was that possibility suggested at the inquiry?"

"No. Someone said I acted as though I were drunk or drugged, the obvious explanation being that I had doped myself through fear. Indeed, I think the court rather inclined to that view. All I know is that, barring two cups of coffee, that morning I took nothing to drink. My last effort in that line was a whisky and soda about ten o'clock the previous night. I couldn't get any more if I wanted it. I had the last half-inch in the only available bottle."

"My hat!" broke in Frensham, "that's right, too! Pantan was checking the reserve ammunition after dinner and a gunner came along to arrange about further artillery support after the barrage lifted. We were hospitable, and those lads can shift whisky a treat.

We were just able to save a toothful for Johnnie here."

Panton smiled.

"I remember your saying that very thing, Arthur," he commented.

"So here was another rather vital fact which was not brought to the notice of the court."

"I suppose so. Don't you see, sir, I was not trying to defend myself. A damnable thing had happened, and I wanted to make the only possible amends. Believe me, had I been allowed, I would have given the order to the firing party myself."

"Evidently you do not know that the President commented on your resigned attitude. You will find it there—on the second last page. . . . Well, we are a purely informal gathering, discussing a difficult matter which cannot be carried much farther to-night . . . Mr. Leslie, have you any course of action in mind?"

"I think we ought to employ an inquiry agent. He must be a very good man. I know one or two who might be trusted."

Leslie spoke slowly. He glanced at Winter, and the Chief took the hint at once.

"Having waited so long, Mr. Panton need not hurry for a day or so," he said. "I assume that all his legal business is not settled yet. Meanwhile, my department will look up a few things which may prove useful, though, of course, we are debarred from any official action. Don't appoint your agent, Mr. Leslie, until you hear from me. Before you do choose him, let me know his name."

Leslie nodded. His confidence had not been misplaced. The splendid organisation of the Criminal Investigation Department would open up avenues which no private detective could follow unaided. Many

people, including a few who really ought to know better, gird at the frequent failures of the police to get on the track of criminals, the truth being that English law, in its too scrupulous consideration for the rights of an individual, often ties the hands of the very men who are able and willing to protect the greater rights of the public.

"I wish we had Connington here to-night," said Furneaux suddenly. "What a pity that this array of talent should miss such an opportunity!"

"Why do you pounce on Connington?" demanded Mr. Mountford with equal quickness. One might have imagined he had been waiting the chance of putting that very question.

"Because he may easily have been the villain of the piece. How old were your subalterns, Mr. Panton?"

"Each about twenty. But I myself was only twenty-two and a few months."

"You had extended war experience. Had they?"

"No. Very little indeed. Our main wastage was in platoon leaders."

"Exactly. Who was likely to benefit, professionally or otherwise, from your collapse? Connington. Who could probably have screened you—at any rate until your company was over the top? Connington. Who put the lid on your coffin and nailed it down at the inquiry? Connington. I'd like to meet him."

"But the chief beneficiary was my cousin, Alistair Panton."

"Yes, I know. Isn't it an admitted principle of the law, Mr. Mountford, that *qui facit per alium facit per se*, or, in plain English, he who acts through another acts himself?"

"Yes, but in this affair isn't that assumption rather farfetched?"

"To the best of my belief," said Panton, "my company-sergeant-major didn't know my cousin existed. We, that is, Alistair and I, never met in France. If anything, we avoided one another. I'm sure I avoided him, because we would surely quarrel at sight, and he lost no opportunity of misrepresenting me to my father. Indeed, because of his cunning, Lord Oban and I were somewhat estranged before I committed the crowning misdeed. Still, in common honesty, I must repeat that Connington and he were complete strangers."

"Common honesty can often be uncommonly mistaken," said Furneaux. "Why, for instance, have you gone out of your way to threaten Mr. Alistair Panton with physical vengeance? He wrote you a perfectly charming letter, and you answer by bidding him run for his life. That's no way to treat a rogue. He must be cozened, cheated, ambushed, yet, if necessary for his more utter undoing, rescued by the very man who set the snare. Look at my respected chief. He exudes good nature from every pore. He almost weeps over the transgressions of the wicked. I've heard him utter a forgiving 'tut-tut' when a murderer confessed his crime. Yet he can wheedle the truth out of the most thorough-paced scoundrel who ever faced judge and jury. That's his forte. I believe I would quarrel with your Alistair, but Mr. Winter would back him into the easiest chair in the room and offer him a big, fat cigar. Ah, me! Why wasn't *he* born in Peebles? Or even in Dumfries? There are points about Dumfries, I believe, Mr. Leslie?"

Leslie laughed. He rose, knowing that the conclave had reached its end for that evening.

"If you're going to jibe at my native town I think it is high time we joined the ladies," he said, "I suggest that we each take away our copy of the court-martial record and study it at leisure. After this discussion we can read it with ampler knowledge. Perhaps, another time, new points may be discernible."

"I like those two lads from the 'Yard,'" confided Frensham to Panton as they went out. "I've a queer sort of suspicion that they have a bit up their sleeve."

"It will be a long sleeve which reaches back seven years," muttered John wearily.

Try as he might, and did, he could see no ray of hope. Winter was undoubtedly a fine type of public official, and Furneaux impressed him as an erratic genius. But what had either said which inspired belief that some discovery might be made which would rehabilitate him in the eyes of his fellow-men? It would be foolish to hug illusions. He regretted more and more the queer chain of circumstances which had dragged him out of the seclusion and anonymity of Moose Lake. More than once its links had nearly broken, and he wished now that this very thing had happened. There was a bitterness in that joke of Furneaux's about Winter hobnobbing with criminals. What else was he doing now, together with Frensham, Leslie, and the rest? Good fellows, all of them, but they could not keep it up. They would strive to conceal the plain truth, but the day must come soon when they would realise that all the water in the sea could not wash away the stain attached to his name. What right had he to put their kindness to such a test? Would it not be better——

"Dash it all, Johnnie," growled Frensham, "are you deaf? I've howled in your ear twice, but I might as well be whispering to that statue which the little detective joker seems to be hankering after. Before we reach the drawing-room I want to know something about little bright-eyes from Canada. She's Leslie's niece, I gather. Tell me more."

"No need," said Panton, rousing himself. "You go and sit by her side. She'll do the rest. Her father is a big man in the Hudson Bay Company, and she is probably the most popular young person in Edmonton, where the stage may have grown too small for her."

"Anything doing—in your direction?"

They were talking in the dim light of a passage, yet Panton's eyes blazed with a fiery intensity that rather startled his easy-going friend.

"You don't understand, Arthur; but why should you?" he said, and the subdued passion in his voice lent it the deep *timbre* of tragedy. "I have lost the girl I love, the only girl I shall ever love. Alistair married her—forced her to marry *him* may be the truer way of putting it. I could have forgiven him anything but that. If, some day, you are told that I have smashed his head to a pulp you will, at least, know why I did it. . . . Pardon me, old chap. I must be alone for a few minutes. I'll just whistle Spot out into the garden."

Those last few words were uttered in a more natural way, and they evidently carried into the drawing-room, because May Leslie cried cheerfully:

"Spot is here, lolling on a rug. He has been retrieving golf balls for nearly an hour, and I guess he's

just sick to death of the garden, which he examined once thoroughly, but failed to find even a field-mouse. Don't let John get away, Sir Arthur. Bring him in and we'll talk Canada. That chip shot of yours is a daisy. Who taught it to you?"

John yielded, being robbed of his excuse. Soon he was back in his right mind. Winter led him on to discourse on sport in the great North-West. At May Leslie's request Spot and he gave an exhibition of "jerks" on the drawing-room carpet and were loudly applauded.

The C.I.D. men left early. Furneaux, who had an uncanny trick of reading men's minds, surprised John greatly by saying:

"Buck up, Mr. Panton! Even in Northern Alberta summer follows winter, you know. If I had time to polish the jest I'd made play on the Chief's most misleading name. You've had a pretty rough time, so the smooth is about due. It's the swing of the pendulum. The farther it goes one way the farther it travels back in the other. So, cheeri-o *Au revoir sans adieux*, as you may have tried to say in France."

The Chief lived in Battersea, Furneaux, near Baker-street, but both went to the "Yard" to clear up the day's business before going home. They had no sooner entered their car than they discussed John's case in all its bearings.

"While you were flirting with the little girl from Edmonton, Mountford told me something which may prove worth while," said Winter, thoughtfully biting the end off a fresh cigar. "Major Alistair Panton, though in charge of a transport section, was also secretly employed in investigating the distribution and

sale of drugs along the Western Front. Our men, as a class, knew nothing about 'snow' and the rest of the stuff——"

"Why leave out nicotine?"

"Don't interrupt, you rat, but listen, and you may learn a bit. Where was I? Stuff——"

"How true!"

"Confound you, Mountford's information may be of immense value."

"As evidence, yes. The trained mind of the thinker has discovered it long since. The drugs were obtainable. John Panton was undoubtedly drugged. By whom? By either Connington or Cousin Alistair, or by both, acting in collusion. From what I have heard of Alistair he is far too spry to get himself mixed up in a movie plot of that kind. If he figured in the deal at all it was in some way that would defy subsequent investigation. So, we must find Connington. He is the nerve centre of the inquiry."

The Chief smiled blandly.

"I thought that when Leslie came in this afternoon and told me the whole story," he said. "I put out an inquiry through our special squad, and they had reason to believe that the man is now in London, living under an alias, and consorting with suspected drug purveyors."

"Ah!" smiled Furneaux.

Winter's self-satisfied air vanished. He smiled again, but uneasily this time.

"Of course, I did not tell you on our way to Braeside. I wanted to see how the affair struck you when you tackled it with an open mind."

"And you were naturally delighted to find that my unaided intelligence could dispense with the orthodox

formula 'from information received.' *Cré nom!* Did you doubt me after all these years?"

"Not a bit of it. I was simply anxious to get you back into form after a surfeit of commonplace thefts, in which the main point at issue is whether one is to credit a weeping lady who has lost all her jewels or a highly suspicious insurance company. It's a pity we can't interfere officially in this Panton case. Fur will fly in all directions before it is cleared up."

"Well, I forgive you. Nice young fellow, the Honourable John."

"I'd like him better if he ceased brooding."

"What else had the poor devil to do while buried alive in some shack of the wilderness? You muddle your head by reading silly romances. Here in London, seated cosily in your office chair while your slaves chase cat-burglars over steep roofs, it sounds wildly adventurous to buy pelts from Esquimaux and swop strings of beads for elephant tusks with the big black bucks of the Aruwihimi River. But there's nothing in it. The fellows who really do such things are bored stiff. I once knew a man from Upper Burmah who was so fed up with living among tigers, snakes and millions of leeches that he persuaded his mother-in-law to come and keep house for him, just to make sure he was still alive."

"Great Scott!" cried Winter. "Something must have bitten you badly. Was it that dog?"

"Ah, the dog! A noble creature, if you like! I suggest that if we help John to get a strangle-hold on Alistair he donates Spot to Scotland Yard. In a really difficult case that crafty hound would be worth a score of flat-footed bobbies."

The Chief sat back and smoked in silence. He had never before known his diminutive *aide* so wound up after a comparatively mild evening. The literal truth was that both men realised at the same moment that Spot's presence in Great Britain called for explanation, and neither wanted to draw attention to it.

Furneaux, of course, could not let such an opportunity pass.

"Bet you a new hat, James," he cackled, "that I guess what you're thinking—one try only."

"I'm not buying you any new hat, Charles," said Winter firmly. "On this occasion I would lie sooner than pay."

So Spot had made two new friends in the high places.

About the hour that the detectives' car was crossing Westminster Bridge the card party at Inverlochtié broke up. Colonel Grant departed for Glen Inver, some five miles away on the east side of the loch, and the other people went to their own rooms or the billiards-room. Eileen waited until she was sure Alastair would not appear again. Then, knowing that Lord Oban was in the habit of sitting up late to read, she went to his private suite and knocked softly on the door.

"Who's there?" came a surprised query.

"I, Eileen," she answered.

"Come in. . . . What is the matter?"

It was well understood by every member of the household that when the Laird of Inverlochtié retreated to his den he was not to be disturbed without urgent cause. So she began by apologising for the intrusion.

"My dear girl," said he, "you are always welcome. But has anything gone wrong? I thought you would be in bed an hour ago."

"It is not very late, Uncle Hector," she said. "I have come to ask a favour. You heard from John this evening. So did Alistair. He showed me his letter. Will you let me see yours?"

"How do you know I received any letter?" Lord Oban asked.

"I was in the hall when Donald brought them," Eileen replied.

Lord Oban was seated in a comfortable chair with a reading-lamp on a table close to his shoulder. Eileen perched herself on the opposite arm of the chair. For a little while each looked at the other steadily. The man was troubled, the woman quietly insistent. A minor duel was fought between them then and there. Evidently no display of weakness would be forthcoming on either side.

"Why do you persist in mixing yourself up in a family squabble which does not concern you greatly?" said Lord Oban at last. "I think I sense your temperament well enough to believe that you are not particularly disturbed by the fact that while John lives Alistair cannot succeed to the title and estates. At any rate, he cannot assume the title. As for Inverlochtie, once my unhappy son secures his aunt's money I shall instruct my legal representatives to approach him with a view toward the breaking of the entail. He cannot possibly wish to live here in the future. Where *he* is concerned it should be a mere matter of compensation."

"Is that what John wrote about?"

"No. I am telling you my plans, not his."

"Do you refuse my request?"

"I do not wish to pain you."

"Everybody seems very anxious now to spare me

the slightest form of suffering. No such consideration was shown when I was coerced into marrying Alistair."

"Pardon me!"

Lord Oban felt he must stand up. He literally could not endure the girl's candid eyes staring into his at such close quarters. But he gained no advantage by this ruse. Eileen rose, too, and faced him squarely.

"You have taken me at a disadvantage," he went on rather angrily. "I have not given this difficult, for it *is* one, sufficient thought. At this moment I think it best to decide not to produce any letter."

"Very well," said Eileen. "My only alternative is to communicate with John on my own account. He seems to have forgotten my existence, but he **can** hardly decline to answer if I write."

"But what do you want to know?"

"The truth, whatever it may be. You, and my father, and Alistair, of course, have conspired to keep it from me. I refuse to be cajoled any longer. But that is my affair, much more than yours. I came here to-night because I have always regarded you as an eminently straightforward man. If, for reasons which seem good to you, the conspiracy must go on, I have nothing more to say. Good night, uncle!"

She made for the door. Oban threw out his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"How could I foresee this wretched *impasse*?" he cried. "How could any of us—after seven years—when the whole world had been scoured for news of the man who benefited so greatly under my sister's will? Are you being quite fair to me, Eileen?"

"Were any of you three quite fair to me?"

"Confound it! No man could have spoken more plainly than I. Surely you would never have dreamed

of marrying one who had been dismissed from the King's service for cowardice!"

"Perhaps those who direct the King's service made a dreadful mistake."

"Eileen, you must not say that. I know whereof I speak. John was tried by a board of officers, and there could not be one man among them who was not ready and willing to give him the utmost possible benefit of any doubt. The last time, as it was also the first time, this unhappy affair was discussed by you and me I vowed then that I would never again open my lips about it. I have broken that vow to-night for your sake. Believe me, though an old man and a weary one, I am not blind. Alistair and you are drifting to the edge of a cataract, but in my heart I blame you, not him. Why rush wilfully to disaster? And what will you gain when the smash comes? Nothing—nothing good—that is, but if evil be a gain you will receive a rich harvest of obloquy and sneers, and the insufferable innuendo born of half-knowledge. If you won't accept my advice, get that of an experienced woman of the world. Pour your troubles into Lady Lansing's ears. Be frank with her and she will help. Though not one of us by birth, she has assimilated our manners and ways of thought with extraordinary skill, and the mere achievement argues real ability. If you wish it she can see me to-morrow, either with you or alone, and I shall state my case—or our case as I honestly regard it."

Eileen came back a step or two. She wanted to leave the shadows and stand fearlessly in the light. Somehow, the radiance of the lamp seemed more in keeping with her passionate longing for the truth.

"Uncle," she said quietly, though an intense earnest-

ness breathed through every word, "I am sorry for you. You are obsessed by an idea. You are like a man wearing tinted glasses, who sees every vivid colour in a landscape as varying shades of the same neutral tint. Were it otherwise, you would never have admitted that the boy who became a veteran soldier before he was a man, the subaltern and captain who had won golden opinions from at least half a dozen commanding officers, could possibly have yielded to panic in the way alleged before the court-martial. How *could* you believe it—you who read his letters glowing with the hope and belief that the Allied Armies were breaking through at last? Oh, how could a father desert a son who had gone through four years of such a war so cheerfully and with such distinction? Why should I, a woman, consult any other woman as to how a woman should act and think in conditions like these? I *know*. I am sure John was not properly treated. How or when I cannot guess at this moment. But I shall find out."

"Good God, Eileen!" cried the man in a frenzy, "what can you do?"

"I begin, of course, by discovering what John thinks."

Perhaps the vigour of Eileen's defence of her childhood's sweetheart was disturbing. Perhaps John's own words had insensibly broken the crust of years. At any rate, his lordship tore a letter from a pocket and threw it on the table.

"All right!" he stormed. "Why wait? Start now! That is what John thinks!"

CHAPTER IX

SKIRMISHES

EILEEN had read John's outspoken letter to Alistair with a sort of scandalised dismay, but she literally devoured this one. So, then, she had made no mistake in trusting the man she loved, whom she had never ceased to love. How her heart would have throbbed had she heard her lover breathe his constancy almost in those very words, and about that self-same hour into the startled ears of Sir Arthur Frensham! But to-night the very blood in her veins seemed to run ice cold with a new apprehension. What was John thinking of her? She knew now just why he had not written. She was his cousin's wife. He believed he had lost her for ever.

If, by some weird stroke of fate, Alistair died to-morrow and John were admitted once more into the family circle, he might, perhaps, for expediency's sake, ask her to marry him, but deep in his consciousness would lurk the knowledge that she alone had departed from their unwritten bond. It was not so, of course. The vows of a girl of sixteen should not be expected to bind the woman of twenty-three. Had he not expressly commanded her to crush every thought of him out of her life? Whose fault was it that she might well have regarded him as long since dead? His, not hers, he would be the first to assert. Yet though he would never say it, never taunt her with an unkind

word, how could he forget that in the ultimate test he had proved steadfast and she fickle?

And the pity of it was that their boy-and-girl romance was the only thing which had endured through the weary years. The ceremonial in St. Margaret's, Westminster, had become a travesty of the sacrament of matrimony within an hour of its conclusion, and so long as Alistair lived must remain something more than a travesty—a tragic instance of man-made laws over-riding the Divine ordinance. "Male and female created He them." John was her man, she his woman, yet were they cruelly severed.

For this unhappy girl was endowed with the wisdom of her generation. She was well aware that suits for nullity of marriage could be brought in the courts—that divorce was possible if one breasted the stream of mud which barred the road to freedom. But that could not restore the idylls of her dreams. She had always hoped that John would come back and tell her that all which had gone before was an affrighting nightmare, an ugly phantom of the dead war, a ghoul compelled to disappear when the nations regained their sanity, and the light of reason shone once more over a stricken world. Well, here he was. He, too, had dreamed. Was not that what the letter to his father really meant? How utterly merciless life could be! Why, after waiting seven leaden-footed years, should one short day, even a few hours, have plunged her into an unfathomable abyss?

Naturally, Eileen's tortured brain did not marshall these poignant thoughts in due order. Rather did they flicker before her mind's eye in a mad jumble of inconsequence. But she retained control of her faculties most marvellously. After one reading she could

repeat, and would never fail to remember, that bitter-sweet demand of her lover for an explanation of the marriage.

Her eyes, though laden with pain, were steel-bright when she lifted them to meet Lord Oban's angry stare.

"Have you answered this?" she said.

Alistair had been taken aback by her irrelevance; his uncle was surprised now by her straight-forwardness.

"No," he snapped. "What is there to answer?"

"Everything. He asks if you helped in trapping me into marrying a—let me see, how does he put it?—'a reptile like Alistair.' You remember, don't you, Uncle Hector, how John and I adapted Alistair's initials and nicknamed him 'Asp'? Hence the 'reptile,' I suppose. . . . Well, what shall you tell him?"

His lordship thrust out an emphatic hand.

"He gets no reply from me. If you are so ready to quote one phrase, why shirk another? He says plainly enough it was he, not I, nor even Alistair whom he hates, who must be held responsible for what has happened."

"Oh, no. That feeble retort is not worthy of you. He acquits you of any wilful wrongdoing towards him, but pleads for your assurance, 'as a last favour,' that you did not share in my father's responsibility for a vile compact."

"Eileen, you hardly know what you are saying."

"Please, please, for these few minutes let us get away from idle pretence. We may never again have a chance of being utterly candid with one another."

The man's petulance, his sense of injured dignity, was now beginning to yield to an indefinite fear. What absurdity might not this emotional girl be planning!

"You are hardly yourself to-night, Eileen," he said, striving to regain his poise. "I should not have shown you that letter, but the mischief is done, and I have hated concealment and intrigue all my life. Come to me in the morning. We are a trifle unstrung now. Most certainly *I* am, and I would sooner see you incoherent and in tears than in a mood of lawyer-like precision. Eileen, leave me, I beg of you. To-morrow——"

She smiled sorrowfully, though with a hint of scorn which froze the words on Lord Oban's lips.

"'Incoherent and in tears,' " she repeated. "True, I am not yet weeping—yet; but only a moment ago you charged me with not knowing what I was saying. Isn't that a form of incoherency? Ah, me! I find it hard to believe that the man I have always taken you to be should offer such a poor excuse for shirking the truth."

She was glad to see anger flushing his face again. If she could flog him into attack or defence—she cared not which—she might drag out of him some clear statement of his resolve, because, with a penetrating insight into his mind which Lord Oban little suspected, she was quite sure that his son's frank appeal had touched him deeply.

"That is not warranted," he said harshly. "You—you are usurping the privileges of your sex, Eileen."

"Am I? Let us ignore sex for a little while, then. Not very many years ago, were I a man, you and I would be snatching at our swords and striving to kill each other in this very room for far less than I have said to you to-night, and for immeasurably less than the evil you and others have done to me. But if manners change, men and women do not. Let us use

words as weapons, then. You admitted in London that you conspired, though unwillingly, with my father and Alistair to conceal from me the displeasing fact that John was not only alive but coming home. Why do you flinch from telling that to John? It is nothing more than an excuse, but he may accept it."

Lord Oban blazed again into wrath at that.

"John accept excuses from me! John, who dragged our once proud name in the mire! Eileen, you force from me something which I have meant never to tell man or woman. Every night I pray to God that I may be allowed to breathe out my life in my country's service, no matter when or where, or what the conditions. Thus can I make some poor atonement for my son's failure. *My* son, a coward, dismissed from the British Army! Oh, woman, not until you bear children of your own will you realise what John's disgrace meant to me!"

He was trembling with agony now, but Eileen swept aside ruthlessly his plea for understanding.

"Far better," she said, "that you should pray for light on the dark places of John's life. You accept the verdict of a court-martial as though it were one of the Ten Commandments, and that, I suppose, is the way men judge other men. I, a woman, find *you* guilty of double-dealing with me and your son, yet you brush aside *my* verdict as though it meant something utterly unfounded. . . . So your armour of self-sufficiency is pierced at last!" for Lord Oban could not have writhed more realistically had she caught from the walls one of the claymores hanging there and stabbed him with it. "Well, then, if honour is satisfied, will you now tell me what you mean to write to John in condonation of your wretched action, and

when you mean to do it? I ask this because I still have faith in you. My father will follow your lead. Alistair! What is it to me what Alistair does?"

The man dropped back into his chair. His head was bowed. He buried his face in his hands.

"You must go now, Eileen," he muttered brokenly. "Come to-morrow! I—I——"

But she did not go. She ran round the table again, sank to her knees by his side, and threw her young arms around his neck.

"You poor dear!" she sobbed, "do you think that my suffering blinds me to *your* pain? You asked for tears. Well—here they are—salt and bitter as the Waters of Marah! But has not John suffered more, far more, than either of us? Is there to be no pity for him? . . . There! I am grieved for you as for myself, and I go now to pray as I have never prayed before that we two may be guided to act rightly, no matter what the consequences. Humility, not pride, may be the better way."

Knowing that he had yielded she crept out, closing the door softly so as not to disturb the household. Her eyes were brimming, but a sense of victory sent a warm surge through her veins. Somehow she felt that a battle was imminent, and that she had been the first to strike a shrewd blow in John's behalf.

The corridor was dim. Its wainscot, floor and roof were of old oak, and its pictures and furniture, some bookcases, and a couple of bridewains were equally sombre. Lord Oban's apartments were at the extreme end, on the right, so Eileen went slowly, trying to clear her eyes, toward a cross corridor full fifty feet away. There a small electric lamp sent its feeble gleams along all three passages.

Her rooms lay to the left, and she had nearly reached the turn when Alistair appeared. She could not be sure whether he was lurking behind a bridewain or had been completely hidden around the corner. Then she remembered that the door of Lord Oban's sitting-room had not been shut tight all the time she was there. Had her husband been spying? she wondered.

"I missed you from your room, Eileen," he said pleasantly. "I wanted to have a word with you before you retired for the night, and was puzzled when I found you were not in."

"Did you enter my room?"

Her frozen tone might well have checked any display of friendliness on Alistair's part, but he only chuckled. He was trying to reassure her, but in her ears that oily laugh held the merriment of a satyr.

"I knocked first, of course," he said. "May I come with you now? It is not very late. There are matters you and I should discuss, and—er—between husband and wife such visits are permissible."

"No. You must wait till the morning."

That stung him; still he affected indifference.

"I suppose I may not even ask where you have been?" he went on.

"Oh, yes. It is no secret. I have persuaded Uncle Hector to show me John's letter."

He caught her right wrist, and drew her close, almost forcibly. She could not distinguish between excitement and fright on his part.

"Have you indeed?" he growled, sinking his voice. "In that case I *must* come to your room. If there is trouble brewing we must face it together, you and I."

"Let go!" she said, speaking in an equally low tone.

"I'll do nothing of the sort. It's high time——"

He was compelling her to move. With her free hand she knocked loudly on the panels of a door they were passing at the moment.

"Betty!" she cried. "You can't be asleep yet. Come at once!"

"Hallo! *Hal-lo!*" came a muffled shout. "What's up! Where's the fire?"

"You fool!" muttered Alistair thickly. "You headstrong little fool!"

But he, like most other people in the world, had to give way to convention. He relaxed his grip. They heard the click of an electric switch, and the Honourable Betty Bridgnorth appeared. She was in her night-dress, but her sturdy figure framed by the well-lighted doorway looked none the less capable when lightly clad.

"What is it Eileen?" she said. "Hallo, you there, too?"—this to Alistair. "Has the family had a bust-up—or what?"

Eileen thought she would let her husband answer, and therein acted wisely.

"I thought I'd call in on Oban for a minute or two, but Eileen seems to object," he explained.

"And what's the alternative? Am I to deputise?"

"No, but you may be able to put some sense into Eileen. She's making a fuss about nothing."

"I don't agree with that," said Betty stoutly. "Unless the leopard has changed his spots Uncle Hector will be particularly grumpy if you storm his den at this time of night. Hop it, you! . . . Are you coming in, Eileen?"

"No, dear. It's too bad to disturb you, but Alistair

would not listen. Would you mind leaving your door open an inch or two till I reach my room? The passage is dark."

"Oh, I'll come with you. I was curled up between the sheets, but don't feel a bit tired. Mary Lansing is a slow walker for a leggy one like her. She stops every hundred yards to admire the view. . . . Good-night once more Alistair. Take my tip and leave Oban alone. Your business, whatever it may be, will keep till the morning. He'll be horribly unsympathetic to-night. In fact, I'm surprised he is not out already to ask why the devil we're kicking up such a shindy. Eileen, you must have skinned your knuckles badly the way you rapped on my door."

Part of this monologue was addressed to Alistair's retreating form, and part to the curiously silent figure by her side. She had noticed, of course, that the two were clothed exactly as she had last seen them in the smoking-room, but realised instantly that the proposed visit to Lord Oban was only a flimsy excuse for some quarrel which had sprung up unexpectedly outside her door. Alistair, at any rate, seemed to have abandoned his project. They heard him going down the main staircase.

"Now, kid," said Betty, with a surprising tenderness in her voice. "What's gone wrong? Do you want to tell?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Come with me, Betty. I'm actually—afraid—to be alone. I feel—I want to cry—on your shoulder!"

"It'll make my nightie horribly damp. Lend me that pretty shawl of yours. It will shrink, of course, but that is better than my getting an attack of sniffles. . . . Well, crying won't help. Cut it out and state

your case. Alistair is a beast. He always was. But you're not afraid of *him*, are you?"

By this time they were locked inside Eileen's suite. The night had come in rather cold, so an electric stove was agreeable for bare feet and bare shoulders alike.

"I'm all right now," smiled Eileen mistily. "I lost my nerve for a moment, but Alistair was almost brutal, and I have just been having a trying time with Uncle Hector. You see, Betty, I have discovered that no matter how John may have erred in the past, we are treating him shamefully now. Sit down there, dear, and listen. You must be told some day. Why not to-night?"

If some skilled astrologer could have cast Alistair Panton's "nativity" about that time he would surely have found a particularly baleful planet in the ascendant. Eileen, whose polite hauteur was beginning to thaw in public into a quiet deference, had suddenly treated him as though his very nearness were abhorrent. It needed little of his close knowledge of the feminine temperament to warn him of the change. When they spoke together while the others were at the bridge-table she stood out boldly for the fulfilment of his promise in regard to the letter, but in all else she was weakening perceptibly. He had never intended to withhold John's reply altogether. His reluctance was feigned, a well-calculated move to win her respect by striving to spare her feelings when she read that violent screed. Indeed, they had parted rather amicably, he in full command of the situation, she seeming to concur.

It was a wholly different Eileen whom he met in the corridor. Had some viper wandered in from the moor, and she had stepped on it unaware, she could not have

recoiled with greater loathing. What, then, had happened meanwhile?

Contrary to her belief, or suspicion rather, he neither knew that John had written to Lord Oban, nor had he overheard any of the conversation between Eileen and his uncle. He had seen her go upstairs, and followed, meaning really to have a chat, and lead her on to discuss the stupidity of their present relations. Then he caught the murmur of voices, and greatly to his surprise and annoyance, had ascertained her whereabouts. He would gladly have listened, but the floor boards of an old house are apt to creak under a heavy weight, and the Lansings had appeared at the wrong moment, drawing him back quickly on thievish feet, and detaining him by some chatter about the weather prospects of the morrow.

His cold fury against Eileen, however, did not conquer his judgment now. Betty's advice was sound, though she could not have begun to imagine why he wanted so urgently to get in touch with his uncle. He made for the smoking-room, mixed a whisky and soda, and wrote some letters, giving marked care to the preparation of the draft of one, and copying it when approved. He did not drop this letter into the post-box in the hall which would be cleared early next day. Disposing of the others in the orthodox way, he pocketed it, together with the draft. Then he went to bed, meeting a list-shod night-watchman on the stairs.

"All the birds roosted, Dougal?" he inquired cheerfully, since he cultivated cordial relations with everyone employed in the house and on the estate.

"Mebbe not all, sir," was the cautious reply.

"Oh, is Miss Betty still in my wife's room?"

"Ah'm thenkin' so, sir."

"Well, well. What gossips these women are!"

Some mischief was brewing—that was evident—but the fact did not disturb his rest. He slept soundly, and was his urbane self when he strolled into the breakfast-room next morning. The Hon. Betty Bridgnorth was at the sideboard, hesitating between scrambled eggs and tomatoes and kidneys and bacon. She elected to take samples of all.

"Had a good night, Betty?" he cried.

"Fine. Why were *you* up so early?"

"Who said I was?"

"Alistair, if you don't learn to tell the truth occasionally you'll get into horrible trouble one of these days."

"Is it of any real importance that I should take a quiet stroll before breakfast?"

"No. Indeed, it would do both you and me good if we ran a mile on an empty tummy. I was just talking on general principles."

Lord Oban came in. The Lansings appeared with Eileen. The little gathering was noticeably silent over the meal, but that is nothing remarkable at any British breakfast-table, where anyone inclined to cheerfulness is generally regarded with suspicion if not positive hatred by every other person present.

Alistair had special cause to chew the cud of reflection; for once in his life he had not been quite careful enough.

The letters were taken from the mail-box by one of the gardeners, entrusted with a special key, whose duty it was to put them in a locked bag and post them in the village. The man was leaving the house when Alistair hailed him.

"Ah, Brown," he said, coming through a wicket gate

which separated garden and drive, "I'm glad I saw you. It won't take ten seconds to run through the bag and see if I've posted a letter to some fellow—dashed if I can remember his name—Dorrington, I think it is—to whom I wrote yesterday. It's of no importance, but I don't want either to appear uncivil or write twice."

The gardener opened the post bag, and glanced at some thirty letters. Alistair helped. There was no letter for "Dorrington," nor, what was far more to the point, for "The Hon. John Panton."

Alistair looked duly mystified. Then, clapping a hand to his head, he produced a bundle of correspondence from a pocket.

"By gad!" he cried, "What tricks one's memory plays! I've just remembered putting the bally letter here, and I didn't post it when I dressed for dinner last night. Here you are! Sorry to have troubled you, Brown."

"That's all right, sir," said the man, hurrying off.

Now, the two had met almost on the exact spot where Eileen first noticed Postmaster Macdonald the preceding evening, so they were visible from many windows. It did not matter of course. The incident was a perfectly natural one; Alistair, some of whose actions were mole-like in their burrowings, gave no heed to the fact that someone in the house might have been admiring the landscape just then.

He assumed, at the breakfast table, that his cousin had seen him, but he cared not a jot what Betty might think. His only concern was lest Lord Oban should have written to his son before he, Alistair, had been consulted. No matter what line John might have taken in the letter to his father of which Eileen had spoken

the abuse and threats showered on one who had never been known to do him an injury could not fail to influence the reply, provided it were really true that his lordship meant departing in that slight degree from the Spartan rôle of an unforgiving parent. In effect, Uncle Hector must peruse John's answer to Alistair at the first practicable moment.

The opportunity came sooner than Alistair himself expected. Lord Oban had not a hearty appetite that morning. He ate but little, and that slowly. Rising before the others, he asked his nephew to come to "the den" when at liberty.

Eileen lifted her head at that.

"May I come too, uncle?" she said.

The request was a veritable challenge. It sent a mild shock through the room, because the Lansings felt electricity in the air.

But "uncle" only smiled. He was master of his emotions that morning.

"No," he said kindly enough. "Later, if you wish, but I want a few words with Alistair first."

She left it at that. There was no sense in provoking a disagreeable scene, and she was convinced that for once in his life Alistair would not prevail against John.

The episode was quietly dramatic in its own way, but its interest did not begin to compare with the tense situation caused by Brown's perfectly natural curiosity as to the name which Mr. Alistair Panton professed to have forgotten. Dropping the letters one by one into the box at Inverlochtie Post Office he came on that intended for a Mr. Dorrington. Odd how Mr. Alistair had been mistaken.

"It's no' Dorrington, but Connington," said Dougal to himself. "Ferdinand Connington, Esq., care o'

the Secreterry, Gamma-Delta Club, Dean-street, Soho, Lunnon. Gosh, what an address; Connington? I mind no Conningtons i' this pairt o' Inverness. Gamma-Delta? Noo, what's one tae mek o' worrds like they? An' it's marked 'kindly forward,' as weel. Happen this laddie 'Dorrington—Connington' is no' there at a', but i' some other outlandish place kent on'y by some Secreterry. Anyhow, in ye gae!"

The singular fact about this quite simple incident was that Brown's not too greatly encumbered brain should be able to retain the complete superscription on the envelope for just so long a time as was absolutely necessary to render the information of utmost importance. If criminals made no mistakes they would seldom be caught. If wise persons like Alistair Panton did not occasionally under-estimate the wisdom of others they would be invulnerable, whether their actions boded good or evil to their fellow men.

CHAPTER X

THE BATTLE BEGINS

ALISTAIR did not hurry over his breakfast. His philosophy of life was that of the Epicureans—that whatever we believe to affect us does affect us, and is therefore real, so error can only arise when mere supposition is confused with that which we actually feel. He felt quite unmistakably that something had gone wrong, and traced the hostile influence to Eileen's championship of that erratic letter-writer, John Bridgnorth Panton.

It was a puzzling situation. Where his family was concerned the heir to Inverlochtie had written only two letters in seven years. One was an altogether priceless production from Alistair's point of view. What high explosive could the other contain to disrupt the home circle so thoroughly. Well, Lord Oban would explain. Meanwhile, a little psycho-analysis might be useful.

Disregarding the Lansings—in fact treating them as foils—he selected Cousin Betty for the experiment. It was a daring effort, but Alistair, thus far, was a Panton who had never been charged with cowardice.

"I hate to mention such a word as 'court-martial,' but I seem to be in for one," he said, smiling as though he were making a harmless joke about an utterly unimportant thing. "Have you been pitching some yarn to Uncle Hector about last night's goings on, Betty?"

"You mean about Eileen?"

"About my wife, yes."

"Betty said 'Eileen'—please be accurate."

Thus Eileen herself. Though she winced at the reference to a court-martial, she did not hesitate to hit back.

"If you people are going to hold a symposium, Mary and I will take a turn on the loch," put in Lansing good-naturedly.

"Nothing of the sort, Reginald," drawled Lady Lansing. "Why spoil a perfectly delightful opening? The last word was yours, Eileen. 'Accurate,' I think it was. It seemed to imply a qualification."

"We're a long, long way from the last word yet," said Betty Bridgnorth, meeting Alistair's mocking eyes with a bovine stare which would have warmed him had he not discounted her stubbornness already. "I don't think anyone here will say it. At any rate, I haven't tried it on Uncle Hector. Since you sneaked upstairs after Eileen last night, Alistair, all I've said to him was 'Good Morning,' and all he has said to me was, 'G-r-r-r,' or something like it in Gaelic."

"I recognise the sound. It means that the head of the clan is in a very bad temper. Perhaps you believe that the last word, or it may be the missing word, has reached him from some outside source?"

"That would be a good guess, but a very misleading description of Cousin John. You, I understand, heard from him yesterday. Why shouldn't he write also to his father?"

"He threatened to slay me at sight. You don't mean to tell me he offers to become a parricide as well?"

"No. Oh, no! I have not seen either letter, but it is quite possible that if he promises you a warm

time when you meet he wants to make sure of his ground first."

"Dear, dear! I seem to have been tried and convicted for some crime the nature of which has not been even suggested so far. . . . Are you mixed up in this, Eileen?"

"Yes."

The hard, unflinching monosyllable flew across the table like a stone. It left Alistair unmoved, but before he could retort Sir Reginald's clenched fist, brought down heavily, rattled all the breakfast crockery.

"Everyone here, not excepting my wife, seems to forget that this sort of thing is beastly bad form," he cried angrily, thrusting back his chair and springing to his feet. "I'm off! Mary, you come too, or I'll go a jolly sight farther than Loch Inver!"

Mary Lansing rose. She sighed, but she knew to an inch the length of tether her husband would allow.

"Too bad!" she said. "These poor dears are going to have a lovely row. . . . Get it over before lunch, will you? You girls can tell me all about it afterwards. But keep the spicy bits from Reginald. He simply hates domestic quarrels. I haven't seen him bang the table like that since young Bertie Fitz-Gibbon sent me into fits one evening by the latest story from Paris. I do wish I could remember it now. It might save the situation."

Joining Lansing in the hall she caught an arm affectionately.

"Reggie, darling," she purred, "you're hopelessly Mid-Victorian, though you were hardly born when the sweet old lady died. Our presence provided a real barrier. The fur will fly in earnest now."

"Don't give a hang if it does," he fumed. "First

time I've ever known Alistair to be an unmitigated ass. *He* started it. Why, I'd like to know?"

"Dearest, if you hadn't exploded, you *would* have known. He did it purposely. He is aching to find out what the young man from Canada has written home, and hopes those two poor creatures will tell him. Then he will be ready to face Oban. Of course, *I* know what the actual trouble is."

"The devil you do!"

"Well, Satan does whisper things to us women. That is why we are so easily misled. But this time, I had no need to get my information from any serpent. Didn't you understand what Eileen meant?"

"No. I didn't want to, nor do I now."

"Very well, dear. Let's fish. We leave the broken water behind."

"Best thing we can do is to have a telegram sent from town recalling us urgently."

"It would be the worst and unkindest thing we could possibly do. I hold no brief for Alistair, but it would be rotten for him if you ran away to-day, and I think I may be able to help Eileen, who is rather a dear. Betty Bridgnorth can take care of herself, and poor old Oban is in the soup, anyhow. If you and I vanish what *will* become of them all? And who will shoot the moors on the Twelfth?"

Reginald Lansing was a rich man largely because he had never failed to listen to and follow his wife's counsel. He took it now, and regretted the fact for many a day. It was particularly artful of her to bring in the grouse. Men who have made money rapidly after an impoverished youth like to shine in some branch of sport. It is their greatest weakness, especially, as in Lansing's case, when they show an unexpected dex-

terity with rod and gun. Next year he would have a moor and salmon stream of his own, a pleasing fact which he thought he was keeping a dead secret from Mary. She helped in that, too. Never, by even an indiscreet glance, did she seem to notice his marked interest in books on sport, or the succession of circulars which reached him from agents who dealt in sporting estates.

They were an odd pair, extraordinarily well matched. Their three children, two boys and a girl, were due to travel north within a few days. Mary Lansing was half-minded to reverse the direction of the telegram suggested by her husband. Inverlochtié would be a livelier place when her youngsters arrived. But she repressed her inclination, which only goes to show that when fate has blazed the trail mere mortals must follow it willy-nilly.

The trio in the breakfast-room settled down at once to the flaying which Mary Lansing had foreseen. Betty Bridgnorth forced the pace from the outset.

"You have a heap of imperfections—to put it mildly—Alistair," she said, "but I never credited you with lack of tact. Indeed, tact, which is often another name for guile, is your long suit, so I'm honestly surprised at your stupidity in bringing the Lansings into this quarrel."

Alistair peeled a peach lovingly.

"Who's quarrelling, Betty?" he said.

"You're trying your best to provoke Eileen into one. You must be a fool if you don't see that she is more ready for a scrap than you ever were, even in war time."

"Ah! That is a new count in the indictment. First time I have been accused of Cuthbertism."

"You took jolly good care never to see a front-line trench except through a telescope."

Her cousin laughed. He did really err then. He believed Betty had lost her temper.

"The Centurion says 'Go,' and he goeth. I went where I was sent," he retorted, but wholly without heat.

"Yes. I have heard before of Old Nick quoting Scripture. But I have not forgotten that four years ago I met Sir Herbert Perring at Hurlingham. The talk turned of John, whom he liked. He wanted to have John on his staff, but you pulled every string you could lay hands on to get another man appointed in his place. And you succeeded, too."

Alistair flushed, but did not flinch, though he had not looked for this straight punch. He thrust away his plate. That infernal peach was over-ripe.

"Sir Herbert Perring was removed for incompetence in June, 1918," he said.

"Nothing of the sort. He was crippled with gout. Incompetents don't earn the K.C.B."

"Oh, don't they? Ask any man in the Foreign Office who hasn't got it. But why this uncompromising attack on me, Betty?"

"It's pouring water on a duck's back, I know, but I do want you to understand that if you lash out at Eileen and me we're ready and willing to give blow for blow, and a bit over if necessary."

"Ah!" said Alistair placidly. "An alliance!"

"Call it what you like, and don't imagine because Eileen keeps mum she is afraid to speak. If you were not so cocksure of your superior mentality you'd realise now that *I'm* talking only to stop *her*. When she opens up you'll hear something, and it will not be to your advantage, as the lawyers' advertisements put it."

Alistair looked squarely at his wife.

"You are always prating about candour," he said. "Pray give us an exhibition of it. What special charge do *you* bring against me?"

"None."

Eileen's new trick of syllabic expression was disconcerting, but the man smiled agreeably.

"That's a comfort," he vowed. "But Betty, goodness only knows why, credits me with brains, and the inference I draw is that the charges are general rather than specific. That, by the way, is the line John takes in his letter. Are you copying him?"

"No, merely agreeing with him."

"Do I take it, then, that I may expect you to strike from behind while he squares up to me in front? Or perhaps, in the conditions, the order may be reversed."

"I hope I shall be present when John meets you. He will not need my help."

"By Jove! A nice sort of wife you are."

"I am not your wife."

"Yes you are. It will take a devil of a lot of evidence to prove otherwise. You may fail all along the line. Judges are far too wary nowadays to take the mere say-so of virginal young ladies who want to get rid of their lawful husbands."

"So you're a cad, too, Alistair," cried Betty, kicking away her chair with a startling suddenness. "Come with me, Eileen. I don't give a rap what Uncle Hector decides to do. After that noble remark of Alistair's I'm for you in this shindy right to the finish. My only regret is that John can't walk in this minute. I'd ask him, as a personal favour, to arrange that my other beloved cousin could see neither Lord Oban nor

anybody else for the next fortnight, or as long as a pair of black eyes interferes with one's sight."

All three were on their feet almost at the same moment, but Alistair thrust out a restraining hand.

"One moment, Eileen," he said, and his voice was marvellously calm. "You and I have reached a stage where some sort of understanding is essential. We are lawfully married. The world, our world, will laugh if you pretend and I deny that our marriage was one in name only. And that is what will happen if you try that tack. Of course, this being a free country you can run away and see if John will condone your supposed infidelity to him. But I'll not divorce you. I'll see you and him dead first. And I'll never give you the slightest pretext for divorcing me . . . *You* know that, don't you, Betty?"

Betty, for an instant, was stricken dumb with rage. Not so Eileen. She met his mocking eyes steadfastly.

"I know nothing of John's wishes, except the implied indication of them in his letter to his father," she said. "But I do know that there are places in the world where a woman is not compelled to remain tied to a man whom she loathes. If John wishes to take me to some such blessed clime I'll go with him. If he does not, I must dree my own weird. But never again from this moment shall I regard you as my husband. I recognise no court of law in that matter, I shall deny the tie at the very Judgment Seat."

No one could question Eileen's sincerity. Even Alistair did not attempt to ignore it.

"So, because of some whim on your part, based on sheer illusion, you have resolved to face the obloquy of marrying—shall we call it?—a man utterly disgraced and degraded in the sight of every friend you possess

in the world?" he said, trying to make each word cut like a whip, since he was in no mood now to spare anyone.

"No. That is not the way I have been taught to regard honour. If John Panton tells me, without any qualification or redeeming circumstance, that he was justly convicted I shall believe him though it break my heart. He and I must part then, not for seven more years but for ever. But that does not mean a return to you. You and I part now. I cast you off. I shall not even acknowledge your name. You have shown me your true character this morning. I can almost laugh at the folly which nearly led me to believe in you. Indeed, I would laugh if I were not terrified by the narrowness of my escape."

"That's enough for this session, Eileen," snorted Betty, and the two women went out.

Alistair lighted a cigarette. He was perplexed, not so much by Eileen's attitude as by his own failure. For once in his life his system of psychology had misled him. Instead of guidance he had sustained a positive check. He had meant to alarm Eileen. All he had succeeded in doing was to wring from her as complete a renunciation as ever any husband got from a wife.

What the deuce was the explanation of this sudden storm? Well, he had better find out, and the way to knowledge led to Lord Oban.

Here again he met with a rebuff. His uncle was not to be cajoled out of a fixed resolve to answer John's letter.

"The boy asks for my personal assurance that I did not connive at the scheme which brought about your marriage while Eileen was ignorant of his homecom-

ing," he said doggedly. "I cannot give it, but it is his due that he should be told the truth. Eileen demands it, and I dare not refuse."

"Of course, Uncle Hector, you know what all this means?" said Alistair, curbing the desire to use very much stronger language.

"No. I can see no really serious outcome. Indeed, I am inclined to believe now that a straightforward statement may clear the air. The marriage project was no new thing. It had been discussed by both families scores of times. If we made a mistake in concealing the facts from Eileen at the eleventh hour it was an excusable thing. Why, John himself can hardly pretend that the arrangements for the wedding could be cancelled on the very eve of the ceremony, simply because he had cabled from Canada that he was coming home to claim a legacy. Of course, Eileen's rather hysterical outburst upset me last night, but calmer thought this morning shows that she was making a mountain out of a mole-hill. I shall certainly write to John, taking, if necessary, even more than my fair share of the blame. Meanwhile, Alistair, if you care to have my advice, I would in your place, treat your wife with the utmost consideration. She is high-spirited, idealistic, intensely loyal by nature. Let us not endeavour to persuade her that our conduct was faultless throughout. It was not. We only lose ground by pretending otherwise. We may well acknowledge and regret an error of judgment. What more is there to be said? Because John returns to this country that mere fact does not restore his social status or make him any the more eligible a suitor for the hand of a girl who belongs to an old Highland family of untarnished repute."

Alistair did not dare tell his uncle that these amiable platitudes would not serve. He was well acquainted with the type of mind which, bent on righting a wrong, becomes inflexible when its cut-and-dried reasoning is shown to be mistaken. He did not know what Eileen had actually said to Lord Oban overnight. He hoped and believed she had not gone quite so far as in the scornful denunciation flung at him a few minutes ago in the breakfast-room. Probably he had drawn that on himself. Well, he must strive for a truce—the essential preliminary to every treaty of peace.

“All right, sir,” he said deferentially. “I bow to your experience. My position is more than difficult—it is becoming intolerable; but you can count absolutely on my assistance in any effort you make to bring about a settlement.”

So, leaving a good impression on the one man he could not afford to offend, he strolled out to find Eileen and Betty. He was told that they had gone down to the lochside, and that was annoying. If they were with the Lansings his new tactical scheme might be disrupted before ever it saw the light. However, his luck turned. The Lansings had taken the launch and a punt in tow, and were a good mile or more up the lake to the east. The others were following a shore path in that direction. By striking diagonally through the fir plantation he could intercept them.

He saw now that Eileen’s bitterness arose from John Panton’s undeviating faith in her. Curse that headstrong old fool who had retreated from the dinner-table to nurse his woes in secret! He should never have shown that letter to Eileen. It only needed a clearer brain to point out that its implied constancy

was hardly the sort of thing to communicate to another man's wife, and Lord Oban would have thrown the screed in the fire rather than let Eileen read it.

But the mischief was done. Could it be rectified? Not immediately, for certain, with an interfering hussy like Betty in the place. The present need was to gain time. He thought he might find a way.

The women would have avoided him if given a chance, but he was close at hand before they could escape. He had not uttered a word when Betty, still in belligerent mood, challenged him.

"We're going to join the Lansings," she said. "Surely you don't mean to try to spoil our luncheon as well as our breakfast?"

He smiled whimsically, but an ominous frowning of his cousin's brows prevented any display of cynicism.

"No," he explained. "I have come to express my very real regret for everything I said—everything, without exception. I was irritated, but that is no excuse. I am profoundly sorry. I can only ask both of you to believe that if it were possible to wipe out from your minds every syllable of my stupid and unfounded taunts I would deem hardly any sacrifice too great to attain such a result. Of course, it cannot be done, so permit me, at least to make the only atonement in my power by offering a deep and humble apology."

He was wise enough to address himself exclusively to Betty, though including Eileen in this sweeping *amende*. The man was such an incomparable actor that Eileen wondered what Lord Oban could have said to induce this chastened spirit. But Betty laughed loudly.

"You certainly are the frozen limit, Alistair," she gurgled. "What's in the wind now? You may be surprised to hear it, but I like you better when you show fight. Then you disclose your real self."

This, in the language of the proletariat, was an invitation to "put 'em up," but he was not to be tempted into the ring.

"I am trying to speak with all sincerity," he said. "I mean what I have said, in both letter and spirit. But mere protestation carries me no farther. Perhaps, if fate is kind, I may have some opportunity in the near future of proving it. At any rate, you two girls will soon discover that I shall provoke you no more. You may suspect this sudden conversion. Very well. Let that be part of my punishment."

The Honourable Betty Bridgnorth planted her feet well apart, dug an ashplant she was carrying firmly into the turf, crossed her hands on it, and gazed steadily into Alistair's eyes.

"Now, out with it!" she exclaimed. "What's in the wind? This fine talk gets us nowhere—does it, Eileen?"

Eileen shook her head sadly.

"I can hardly bring myself to believe that Alistair is persuaded I can ever forget the insults he flung at me to-day," she said.

Alistair seized this opening adroitly.

"No," he said. "I don't ask it. For once in my life I acted like a born fool, and must pay the penalty. It seems to be a way we Pantons have. So I can do nothing more except hope for forgiveness some time or other. But we might agree now to try to make things agreeable for our guests. I am the real offender; it

is my duty to plead guilty when I meet the Lansings. I only want you two to help."

"In what way?" Eileen demanded.

Alistair bowed.

"I understand," he said. "You are entitled to a reasonable definition. Here it is. Lansing is a decent chap, and he has been something more than a friend to Inverlochtié and Glen Inver. It is no secret that he has helped all of us to make money. Through him, and him only, we have been able to free both estates of heavy mortgages, and are now better off financially than at any time in the memory of man. That is the business side of the affair, and I leave it there. Then there's his wife. We all like *her*. Their three kiddies will be here soon, and they are all supposed to remain until the end of August. Now, Lansing nearly went away after breakfast. One more such scene as my bad temper caused then, and he's off. None of us wants that. I'll do more than my share, and eat all the mud needed to get him to overlook my bad break. You two can pave the way within the next few minutes by simply telling him and Mary that I have almost gone on my knees to both of you in my repentance. Make light of the whole silly business, and leave the rest to me."

"Did you bring any pepper?" demanded Betty suddenly.

"Neither pepper nor salt," said Alistair, failing for once to catch her drift.

"That's a pity. Nothing short of an ounce of pepper thrown into Mary Lansing's eyes would blind her to the fact that a frightful row broke out the moment she left the room."

Alistair laughed quite cheerfully.

"Oh, I don't mind *her*," he said. "You women have your own secrets among yourselves, and the man is a fool who thinks he can limit them. Of course, I implore you not to tell her any of the ugly things I said. Confound it, one should not be held down to those instant inventions of the devil which have no truth in them and are meant only to hurt . . . Well, you have heard my plea. Act now as you think fit."

He raised his hat and strode quickly away.

Betty Bridgnorth prodded a circle of small holes in the turf with the point of her stick.

"You first, Eileen," she said.

"I regard Alistair's advice in regard to the Lansings as eminently sound," came the reply. "It would be sad if they were forced to leave Inverlochtie on account of a family dispute. Where I am concerned, my course is fixed. I shall remain here a few days until I hear from John. Then I shall arrange to meet him."

"Do you really mean that?"

"That, and no more. If I cannot marry John I must find some useful occupation. I shall not continue to figure as Alistair's wife, even nominally. I was willing to play fair until I read John's letter and knew that my heart had not deceived me when it whispered that he was mine for ever and a day. Some sort of film seemed to pass from before my eyes. For the first time in years I saw clearly. . . . It's a strange thing, Betty, but I am almost happy now."

Alistair, breasting the hill rather breathlessly to seek another session with Lord Oban, would not have felt quite so confident of his ability to get out of a mess had he heard Eileen's dispassionate statement. Like that humpbacked Richard of Gloucester whose methods

he was inclined to adapt to his modern needs, he might have muttered to himself:

Was ever woman in this humour woo'ed?

Was ever woman in this humour won?

But there are some women who can be neither wooed nor won my treachery, and Eileen was one. If she could avoid it she would not permit her dust to mingle with Alistair's after the lapse of a thousand years.

CHAPTER XI

A FLANK ATTACK

ABOUT this time John Panton bought a motor-car.

Before he fled in poverty and disgrace to Northern Alberta he was by way of being an expert driver, so an up-to-date small car made a strong appeal. Moreover, life in London was becoming a greater trial every time he went out. He dreaded meeting people who had known him in the past. He shirked the duty of escorting May Leslie and her aunt to those resorts of society in whose frivolities the soul of every young woman delights; above all, the acquired philosophy of those seven lost years rendered him quite pessimistic as to the success which his Wimbledon friends seemed to look for in the efforts being made to restore his good name.

True, each day Mr. Leslie reported some definite progress. Scotland Yard had traced ex-Company-Sergeant-Major Connington to a somewhat notorious night club in Soho where, under an alias, he consorted with many known drug addicts if not with the more dangerous crew who deal in either genuine cocaine or a poor imitation of it. Some unhappy degenerates believe they cannot live without some such stimulation, but they come under police supervision as decoys rather than principals. "Dopey Walker," by which name Connington was known to the frequenters of the

Gamma-Delta Club, was obviously a drug fiend, but he might well be a purveyor also. In effect, he had figured on the "Yard's" register of suspected persons long before his real identity was ascertained as the outcome of Mr. Winter's departmental inquiry.

The discovery was not altogether conducive to John's well-being. It actually disrupted his growing content with life. He seemed to be thrown back to the evil days following his professional collapse. The mere fact that this man still existed so bridged the intervening seven years of peace that they, and not the cruel past, became dream-like. One of his subalterns, Vere-Davis, had been found in the Gower Peninsula farming a herd of Friesian cattle. At Inverlochtie, within a day's journey by rail, Eileen was living as Alistair's wife, yet the glen was a forbidden paradise to the man who yearned for sight of it. And there was a strong hint to hand now that it would be best for all concerned if he resolved never to see it again.

On a Friday morning came a letter from Lord Oban. It began with the conventional "My dear Son" but contained no other word of paternal affection. While admitting that "for a few hours prior to Eileen's marriage" he was aware of John's supposed intention to return from Canada, his lordship justified his own silence by pleading a natural disinclination to cast any shadow on an event which "brought together in perpetuity two families already closely associated by friendship and local interests." He regretted even the semblance of double dealing, but failed to detect wherein the real grievance lay.

"It was preposterous for Eileen to think of marrying you, why should she not marry Alistair?" he wrote winding up an almost curt communication by

suggesting that John should agree to the breaking of the entail.

"I cannot see how you should ever consider even the remote possibility of residence at Inverlochtié, so you may be willing to co-operate in the necessary legal formalities," he argued. "You will be properly compensated, of course. Your lawyers and mine can agree in selecting a referee and two valuers, and the sum they name will be paid."

The letter concluded with a peculiarly outspoken paragraph. It read:

"In the conditions, it seems to me, actuated as I am solely by regard for the future prosperity of an old and honourable family, that you might well adopt a self-denying ordinance and remain unmarried. If you do this, and the union of Eileen and your cousin is blessed with offspring, there is a reasonable prospect of old troubles being forgotten, while the barony should continue without a break. Of course, I cannot demand this act of renunciation. It is for you to decide if such a sacrifice on your part would not be a real and dignified effort to atone for past errors."

John was far from resenting this suggestion. In a sense, it chimed with his own wishes. Had he not suspected that Alistair not only got Lord Oban and Colonel Grant to pester Eileen into marrying him but was also the prime mover in the plot which kept from her the least knowledge that the man she loved was alive and coming home, he would have agreed at once and kept his bond. But he felt that his father was not wholly a free agent, even in this matter. The letter was too cynically reasoned. Had every word chastised him with whips and scorpions he would have

recognised the writer more accurately. Its honesty of purpose was somewhat too patent. Alistair had made the opening move by offering a guarded friendship. Lord Oban was acting along precisely similar lines.

Mr. Leslie shared this view when John went to him.

"I have never met Lord Oban," said the shrewd old lawyer, "but no man can mix in affairs without projecting a more or less accurate picture of himself on to the retina of the public, and I should be surprised to learn that your father drew up those proposals unaided. I hope you have not answered them already?"

John laughed at the alarm in his friend's voice.

"No," he said. "Aren't you my legal adviser, sir?"

"Well, let *me* reply."

"*You?* I hadn't thought of that. I am not inclined for any further bickering. Perhaps I should not put it that way——"

"That's all right, John. You want no more family jars. I understand, and approve fully. That is why you had better depute me to say that I represent you, and your present decision is to leave the whole question in abeyance until the situation is clearer."

"What does that mean exactly?"

"Nothing. But it will puzzle and annoy Mr. Alistair Panton if, as you and I believe, his smooth tongue dictated each sentence your father has written here."

"Still, some sort of settlement is desirable. My own affairs will soon be in order. I shall be quite well-to-do. I don't mind breaking the entail, and I certainly shall not ask a farthing recompense."

Leslie smiled dourly.

"I half expected you to say something Quixotic and

quite foolish of that sort," he growled. "Now, young man, it is high time someone took charge of you and set your feet on the right path. Since this affair interests me rather more than the average law case I don't mind telling you now that I have made some careful search into Mr. Alistair Panton's recent history. He is by way of being quite a wealthy man. He is associated with a rubber magnate, Sir Reginald Lansing, in a number of successful companies. Lord Oban and Colonel Grant are large shareholders. A bank which specialises in mortgages on Scottish properties and acts with a well-known land agency has had its loans on Inverlochtié and Glen Inver paid off. There is money up there now, and plenty of it, and I should not be surprised if someone, whether your father or Mr. Panton, proves ready and willing to pay full value for your right of succession. Why shouldn't he, or they? Why should the dice be always loaded against you? It was by a freak of fortune that you heard of your aunt's legacy, which, after accumulating until your father's death, would have gone to swell Alistair's hoard. No, no, my boy. Once the fish is hooked, I'll play him. Someone else will do the paying henceforth. Besides, what's going to happen if the War Office is compelled to annul the court-martial's verdict and reinstate you in your army rank? Won't that change the position dramatically?"

"In a sense, yes. It will not give me back Eileen."

The lawyer seemed to weigh the point.

"As between solicitor and client plain speaking is advisable," he said. "Why do you assume this young lady's constancy? To put it mildly, were you not guilty of contributory negligence in your treatment of her?"

"I shall never believe, until she herself tells me, that, knowing I lived, she married Alistair."

"You have been so candid throughout that I put the question as a mere formality—have you written to her?"

"No. It would be rather unfair."

"Or she to you?"

"No, again. What was she to say?"

"She might well say the one thing needful. It would not be at all derogatory if she told you that the lapse of years had brought about some modification of her views. Indeed, you could not cavil if she put the whole responsibility on your shoulders—a method of argument rather favoured by her sex, and not wholly unwarranted in this instance. Anyhow, give me that letter, and I promise you that an unpleasant correspondence will stop as suddenly as it began."

The telephone bell rang. Mr. Leslie handed the receiver to John.

"Mr. Furneaux wants a word with you," he explained.

The detective came to the point with his usual jerky directness.

"Free this evening, Mr. Panton?" he inquired.

"Yes. That is to say, I had planned a long walk with Spot and a belated meal somewhere up the Thames Valley."

"Sorry to disappoint Spot. Tell him I'll forward a young rabbit, nicely skinned. I want you to come slumming with me. You will probably meet Conington."

John had grown sensitive these days. He shrank away from the 'phone as though its mere physical contact was disagreeable.

"Is that really necessary?" he said.

"Well—I think so. Wear your oldest lounge suit. And, on second thoughts, bring Spot. His sensitive nose should be introduced to the burrows of Soho."

"Are you serious?"

"I am never otherwise, It's awful to go through life being misunderstood, but that seems to be my lot. To prevent anything of the sort marring a pleasant evening, let me make it clear that you and Spot are invited to dine with Winter and me and another of our men named Sheldon at the Ristorante Milano in Dean Street, kept by one Vittorio Pucci, who weighs about a ton. Eight o'clock sharp, first floor, first door. If there is any festivity at Wimbledon you can promise to be home by ten-thirty."

"Of course, I shall be glad to dine with you——"

"But you're half-hearted about the other fixture. Why not? Still, it may be helpful, and kindly remember that we're doing things for you which might lead to a departmental row if they got known higher up."

"Sorry. I am not unmindful of that aspect of the business. I—er——"

"Yes. Don't say it! If we pull off anything worth while I'll tell you Winter's favourite brand of cigars. I'll not let you off so cheaply. I've had my eye for months on a half-dozen of 1815 brandy—one of the last consignments in the market of a genuine corpse-reviver. A single tot would make Tut-ankh Amen sit up in his gold coffin and take notice."

Nevertheless, John sighed as he replaced the instrument.

"I'm an ungrateful blighter," he said. "Everyone wants to be kind, and I stall them off."

"Not quite so bad as all that," said Leslie. "Make

up your mind to turn over control to me for a month, and you'll be surprised to find how the tangle will unravel itself. What did Furneaux want? . . . Ah, that may be quite important," he went on when John had explained. "I have known the little man many years, and cannot recall one absolute failure when he followed any case in dead earnest. He has some extraordinary theory, based on telepathy, I suppose, that when two people vitally bound up in some mystery get together some magnetic subconscious current comes into play between them and it affects him. Of course, as a hard-headed Scot I scoff at such nonsense, yet, if I had wronged you, and Furneaux brought us together in the same room, I should be worried, afraid of making some slip, needlessly careful of what I said or how I acted. Therein, perhaps, lies the true explanation of his almost uncanny guessing, for it can be nothing else."

Someone knocked on the door.

"May I come in?" cried May Leslie's voice.

"No," said her uncle.

The door opened and the girl popped her head inside.

"Just one sec.," she blurbled. "Arthur is here, John, and wants to know if you will make up a four for Hurlingham to-morrow. It will be a rather good knock 'Indians v. Argentines.' "

"It's the last thing I would dream of doing," was the ungracious answer.

"So I said, and auntie doesn't care for polo—it frightens her. So Arthur is taking little me. I just invited you so as to stop you from being peeved because you were dropped for the afternoon."

"I asked for that, and got it," was John's comment when the door closed.

"Frensham strikes me as quite a nice young fellow," said Leslie, indulging in his favourite trick of saying something apparently not bearing on the point at issue.

"One of the best," agreed John heartily. "He seems to have cottoned on to your niece. If they make a match of it they will be an ideal pair. May will put just the right amount of pep into Arthur."

Leslie nodded. He had not expected so direct a challenge. He wondered what May herself would have said had she heard.

"You may be right," he said. "Of course, you must have acquired some knowledge of the ways of Canadian girls, but I don't think you are a Solomon when it comes to understanding the feminine complex. May has been here now three consecutive summers and has given what she calls the 'once-over' to scores of young men, but I haven't noticed that she is eating her heart out in secret sorrow."

John felt he had been snubbed effectually. He did not care. The prospect of meeting Connington had soured him for the day. Indeed, the notion had occurred already that May Leslie would listen if he began to whisper in her ear, but it was obviously impossible that he should marry any nice girl while he was under the cloud which threatened to darken his whole life. It was exactly this nebulous belief, or half-impression, which had begun to soften his harsh judgment of Alistair. If his own blackened character were the real bar, wherein did Eileen differ from May, or either from any other woman? His father was right. The mere idea was "preposterous" in itself. He passed Lord Oban's letter across the table and rose.

"Answer that as you think fit, sir," he said. "I'll obey orders, never fear."

Leslie, left alone, busied himself at once in drafting a reply. It did not take him long. Writing non-committal words had made up a large part of his business career. Yet, when the text was to his liking, he did not hurry off to the City but sat for some minutes in deep thought. And it is probable, if his thoughts had been given utterance, they would have taken some such form as this:

"When a proud man has been crushed by an almost intolerable disgrace, he seldom or never recaptures the joy of life. Some heedless natures would become convinced of their own innocence, and, having washed clean the slate for themselves, would assume the same complacency by all the world. But such people were never really proud in spirit. John is different. He cannot ever be brought to hope that his lost honour may be retrieved. If it is—and I see a fair prospect of ultimate success in the pending investigation—what will be the outcome? There I am wholly at sea. The one thing I do know is that Miss May Leslie must be content with a baronetcy, if she can get it, instead of a barony. At any rate, John is a good lad, and worth saving, and if I can help it he will neither break the entail nor give any fantastic pledge of celibacy in favour of the Inverlochtie gang."

So Mr. Leslie was not only rather annoyed by Alistair's manœuvring but more than a trifle hard on Eileen if she were included in the comprehensive discourtesy of the word "gang."

Furneaux's sailing directions were so explicit that John Panton did not deem necessary any explanation of his presence to the restaurant staff when he and Spot arrived at the Milano that evening. It was a high, narrow-fronted building, with a staircase leading

straight from the street to the first floor. Entrance to the main dining-room was gained through a door on the right which faced a cashier's desk. An immensely stout man in evening dress was standing there, talking to a customer; he hurried out when he saw the two vanish up the stairs and was about to follow them until Spot faced round. Then he changed his mind.

"Dat is private," he said, civilly enough. "De restaurant is deez-a way," and he waved a fat hand toward the rattle of crockery and hum of conversation on the ground floor.

"Mr. Furneaux told me——" began John, but Signor Pucci instantly waved both hands.

"Quite-a right, sare!" he cried, "I deed not understand'. Vat sort of dog is dat, may one ask?"

"A Canadian sledge dog," explained John, who had found this description more readily grasped in England than the familiar "husky" of the North-West. It was accurate enough, though Spot had never worn harness in his three years of adventurous life.

"Ah, a noble animal!" exclaimed the Italian, still clutching the side door.

"Go and shake a paw, Spot," said John, checking a smile at the stout man's instant embarrassment. Spot, however, trotted back, and held up a fore-paw so engagingly that even a timid child might have been reassured.

"One pats heem on de head, yes?"

"Certainly, signor. He's a most friendly pup."

"*Ebbene!* Good dog! Now, vat you vish to eat? A plate of meenced beef, I tink? It veel be served wit' de roast . . . He vill not scare de waiter, no?"

"He won't even look at the waiter once I tell him where to lie down."

"No, but de vaiter vill look at heem, an' may upset a tray."

"I'll see to that," laughed John.

Furneaux, hearing the voices, came out on the landing.

"You've brightened up a lot since this morning," was his greeting.

"Well, Spot has amused me by finding a pal already. Signor Pucci has taken his order."

"Why not? Spot is the principal guest. Come in! Winter is here, and Mr. Sheldon, whom you have not met."

When everyone, including Spot, had shaken hands, John was offered a cocktail, which he declined.

"I seldom drink anything but water," he said simply. "You see, I was often alone for a month at a time, and it was rather dangerous to cultivate a taste for intoxicants. One of our trappers, a decent little blighter named Mosquito Joe, used to come in occasionally and get horribly blotto until I took a strong line with him. I learnt, quite by chance, that he accounted for his orgies by telling people I shared in them."

"Ah, fancy that! You've made Sheldon open his other eye, Mr. Panton."

John had noticed already that this new member of the C.I.D. owned eyes which differed in size, the pupil of the right eye being considerably larger than that of the left. Like his companions, Sheldon bore no sort of resemblance to the standard detective. He was of average height, and seemingly rather slender. His face was that of the student. He might have been either a doctor or barrister by profession.

"I don't know whether you gentlemen adopt various

disguises when on duty," said John, "but I should imagine that a marked peculiarity of the kind would prove rather a hindrance. I think one gets a first and most definite impression from the eyes."

"First impressions can be most misleading," grinned Furneaux. "The worst scoundrel I know gives you as straight a look as the Chief here."

"Such personal comparisons are vulgar," said Winter, who was stroking Spot.

"Let me put you to the test," smiled Sheldon.

He produced a pink eye-shield, and adjusted it on one eye and then on the other. The change thus effected was almost phenomenal. Facially he became two men. John was amazed and said so.

"Try that on the dog," suggested Furneaux.

Spot was seated on his haunches on a chair. Sheldon went close to him and alternated the shade. Spot was most interested. After a brief scrutiny he tried to nose the contrivance out of the way. For some reason the men from the "Yard" approved thoroughly of this display of intelligence. Half an hour later John knew why.

A somewhat startled waiter, having won Spot's tail-wagging amity by a supply of minced steak, had served an appetising meal and left the diners to coffee and tobacco before the precise motive for John's presence was revealed.

"About this fellow Connington," began the Chief. "Had he any reason to dislike you?"

"Not the slightest," said John, wondering what lay behind the question.

"You never had occasion to reprimand him?"

"Not that I can recall. Of course, tempers got a trifle raw when a strafe was on or the weather and conditions generally were particularly vile, but he figures in my

mind now as a smart and capable non-commissioned officer. I don't think the men liked him, but the company-sergeant-major has a difficult job. He represents discipline."

"Well, you may be surprised to hear that nowadays he had not a good word for you. He says you were always a poor soldier and a secret drinker."

John's face hardened.

"Is that so?" he said quietly. "And I am to meet him to-night!"

"Yes, and what is more, you are not to lay a finger on him. If he abashes you you must be abashed. Please understand that clearly. The scheme is Furneaux's, not mine, but I admit it is worth trying."

"What scheme?"

"This bringing of Connington and you face to face unexpectedly. He was the accuser, you the accused. Furneaux wants to see how the man who accomplished your ruin will behave when he finds you at his elbow. We cannot guess what will come of it. The one thing that must not happen is any sort of quarrel or physical scuffle. If this criminal degenerate—for he is nothing else—insults you you must put up with it and get away—sneak away is what I have really in mind."

John bit on his pipe, but luckily he was beginning to realise that Scotland Yard had espoused his cause in dead earnest, and it was not for him to boggle at difficulties.

"All right," he said. "I'll sneak, if necessary. But how about Spot?"

"Exactly!" broke in Furneaux excitedly. "Just what I want to know. Spot recognises your friends. Will he sense your enemies as quickly?"

"I could almost feel sorry for Connington if the

ultimate decision were left to Spot, and Connington wanted to harm me."

"Splendid! We'll be off in another quarter of an hour. Meanwhile, I'll remove some snags from the road which leads certain unhappy people to the Gamma-Delta Club by describing it. It's something worse than a thieves' kitchen, because we have the highest authority for the belief that a thief may enter Paradise if he repents his sins. I wouldn't insure any member of the Gamma-Delta against total loss by fire, because none of 'em is ever known to repent. I'm afraid one couldn't even reach Purgatory through a side door."

"Don't bring in that old tag from Dante, Charles," said Winter blandly.

"I have tried to forget the line since I entered the service and met you," retorted Furneaux.

So the Big 'Un and Little 'Un of the Yard were bickering already. The quarry was afoot and they had winded it. Oddly enough, the true expert, having dined well, had curled up on a mat and was pretending to be asleep.

CHAPTER XII

THE HEATHER ON FIRE

THE front elevation of the Gamma-Delta Club was grimly Early Victorian, which is a synonym for all that is ugly and forbidding in architecture. It was a compound of tall, dirty, closely curtained windows above and a disreputable-looking second-hand furniture shop beneath. The latter was shuttered, and might not have been opened during many a year if judged solely by its weather-beaten aspect. Entrance to the club premises lay through a locked and barred door in the depths of a dark alley. When this was unbolted in response to a double ring on an electric bell and a peculiar scratching with the nails on an upper panel, one entered the shop's empty inner storeroom, which, on the night of Panton's visit, was plunged into pitch blackness by merely closing the door.

A man who awaited Furneaux outside Pucci's had hurried on ahead, but was on hand to give the signal which drew bolts and bars. He now whispered something to an unseen individual who switched on a feeble electric torch, and thus indicated broad stairs leading to the first floor in two flights. Here another door was unlocked, and patrons were supposed to be scrutinized by an unhealthy-looking woman who sat behind a long, high desk, ending in a flap counter.

Whatever explanation was given it sufficed. The guardian hardly glanced at Furneaux and Panton—

Spot she did not see at all until he was crossing the floor of an ill-lighted room in which a dance had just ceased. Some dozen couples were seated at small tables arranged in front of a service counter. An arched passage showed that this was simply an adjunct to a still more secluded bar. Panton, versed in the wiles of dug-outs, knew that if the police raided the place at least three stout lines of defence would have to be stormed before the first bottle of wine or spirits could be found. Heavy folding shutters were in readiness to protect the club's supplies of intoxicants, while two innocuous urns, marked "Coffee" and "Tea" respectively, supported by a mixed force of cups and plates, would remain on the counter as evidence of convivial virtue.

No one seemed to pay heed to the three men; but many eyes were focused on Spot, who sneezed loudly at the first sniff of concentrated cigarette smoke, which filled the air with a blue mist, but disregarded it completely afterwards. He had withstood stronger reek during many a blizzard at Moose Lake.

The interior bar was as dingy and badly illuminated as the larger dance hall, but some effort had been made to relieve the bareness of the walls by placarding them with cheap sporting prints and a whole collection of unpleasant cartoons cut from a Parisian weekly. This room was nearly half full of men, with a few women, playing cards, chess, and dominoes. Behind a fitted counter stood an array of bottles on shelves. A villainous-looking barman was talking to a man who had his back to the new-comers. Four other men were chatting in a group.

Furneaux's companion muttered something and sidled to a card-table. The detective turned to John, and said in a most casual way:

"There's your friend, chinning with the barkeep. Get close to him, order two liqueur brandies, and see what happens. If he recognises you, hail him by his right name."

Oddly enough, Spot attracted little attention here. He was on a leash, of course, and the scattered tables helped to some extent in concealing his presence.

Panton was sure that the barman gave Furneaux a sharp glance, and just as quickly decided to look at anyone except the detective. He perplexed John by saying in response to the request for the brandy:

"Are you a new member?"

"I suppose so," said John.

"What's your name?"

"John Panton."

"Hell, it is!" snarled the man by John's side.

This individual had been slouching against the counter, resting his elbows on a zinc slab and digging his clenched fists into his jaws, but he whirled around now with an animal-like alertness, his arms dropped, and his right hand passed beneath his coat in the direction of a hip pocket.

"Steady, Dopey!" said the barman in a curiously authoritative way, and the other, after that startled movement, fumbled with thumb and forefinger in his waistcoat pocket as though searching for a mislaid pencil or matchbox.

It was Spot who brought about a real crisis. He stiffened and growled and was ready to spring, so Panton, knowing he would be obeyed, said: "'Tchun!"

The dog yielded and his bushy mane dropped, but the familiar command had an extraordinary effect on the surly fellow who resented Panton's presence so thoroughly. For a second his relaxed limbs straight-

ened, his head was lifted, his hands fell, and his heels nearly clicked. Then he remembered.

"'Tchun yourself!" he cried almost in falsetto. "Some blistering nerve you've got, Panton, butting in here and calling an old soldier to attention!"

John's right fist clenched. Just in time, Furneaux broke in.

"You two seem to know each other," he cackled cheerfully. "The war is over now. Let bygones be bygones!"

John swallowed both his wrath and the insult.

"What's the matter, Connington?" he said. "What cause for a quarrel have I given you?"

"Connington be damned!" shrilled the other, still in the throes of utmost excitement. "My name's Walker. . . . Isn't it, Jim?"—this to the barman.

"Oh, chuck it!" was the disgusted answer. "This yer gentleman calls you Connington. If you didn't want ter own up why the blyzes did you lash out at him in that bald-headed w'y? Sometimes you myke me tired. . . . Did you s'y two liqueurs, sir? Special?"

"Yes," said John. He turned to Connington again.

"I was only talking to my dog," John explained, but an unguarded tone in his voice made the implied apology sound worse than a protest.

"Well, talk some more to him and leave me alone," replied Connington.

"I am not aware that I even addressed you."

"No? That's likely, too. You could always forget things you didn't want to remember."

"But let us at least get this matter cleared up. I was asked for my name and gave it. Surely it was you who attacked me?"

"You knew I was here and thought to surprise me.

Who brought you in, I'd like to know. Was it *you*?" and Connington glowered at Furneaux.

"Yes. And, if it comes to that, why shouldn't I? Do you own the place?"

The detective's geniality had frozen rather rapidly, but the other was too frightened or too angry to notice the fact.

"You little rat, it was you who led me on to jaw about Panton the other evening," he said. "What's the game? What are you after? You look like a cursed lawyer's clerk, but if you think I'm going to whitewash our honourable ex-captain you're jolly well mistaken."

"That's a pity," said Furneaux quietly. "Mr. Panton is no longer a poor man. He can take care of his friends—even of his enemies."

"Friends! He has none. And who'd bother enough about him to be his enemy? You're not going to put that sort of stuff over on me, Mr. Lawyer's Clerk."

"Everybody seems to be passing under his correct name. You may as well know mine. It is Furneaux. Detective-Inspector Furneaux, of the Criminal Investigation Department."

"You don't say so, monkey-face!"

"You're looking for trouble, Dopey," snapped the barman. "You don't even listen when you're told the blinkin' truth. I twigged Mr. Furneaux the minnit he kem in."

"Did you, indeed? Then you must have twigged him the night before last. A nice sort of pal you are not to have given me the office."

"How was I ter know wot he wanted? He tole Ikey there was nothin' doin'—an' he's never bin known ter let a fellow dahn when he sez that. You tike my

tip, Dopey, an' have Mr. Furneaux on yer side, rather'n ag'in yer."

Connington scowled at all three, swung on his heel and walked out. At that moment he recovered a little of the jauntiness of the once smart company sergeant-major.

"And now," cackled Furneaux, "we'll test that liqueur. If it's poor stuff, the word for you, Jim, is 'Mizpah,' which means 'The Lord watch between me and thee.'"

"It's all right, sir," said the barman confidentially. "Heres the bottle!" Sinking his voice to a whisper he added, "It's the on'y one I have in the whole bally place."

Panton paid, but left his glass untasted.

"Need we remain here much longer?" he said, seeing that the detective was not quite so eager to consume the spirit as he pretended to be.

"No," purred the other. "I like to appear polite—that is all. You are seeing things as through a glass darkly, or you would surely have realised by this time that a good many people took a chance in admitting us here to-night. You even took one yourself. Connington might have pulled that revolver in his fright."

"Connington's face would have been smashed to a pulp if his hand had travelled another couple of inches."

"No doubt. I was wondering who would maul him first, you or Spot. . . . Well, if you won't drink we may as well sample the fresh air. . . . Jim, this is a rotten hole. Clear out, after to-night."

The barman pricked his ears at that. Possibly, too, he did some hard thinking. When the proprietor, secretary, attendants, and frequenters of the Gamma-Delta Club were taken away in vans by the police a few even-

ings later Jim was missing. So also was the nebulous person known as Ikey. Nor did any Connington or Walker figure in the charge-sheet at the police-station.

"I can't be seen walking down Shaftesbury-avenue with Spot," announced Furneaux when they stood in the street again. "The appearance of two such attractions on the same stage would be recorded in the newspapers. Do you care to drive me as far as the 'Yard'?"

"I'll go anywhere to escape from this locality," said John, in his uncompromising way. The detective hailed a passing taxicab and they got in.

"Don't be unfair to Soho," he said, after nodding casually to a nondescript pipe-smoker leaning against a corner slump standard. "Its palaces have become slums, but it claims a glorious past. Even yet it may be redeemed by its restaurants. Places like Pucci's are wholesome germs of new life."

His hearer, however, was not to be beguiled by such fantasies.

"I feel I want to speak plainly, Mr. Furneaux——" he began.

"Go right ahead. That is the orthodox opening for many a foolish speech. Look at Spot! He never says a word—but does he err in judgment? Didn't he size up Connington in one sniff?"

"That is exactly my point. What possible reason is there why I should remain in London? What purpose have I served by meeting Connington? You and others have been extraordinarily kind, but I tell you candidly I have never seen any prospect of upsetting the finding of the court-martial, and Connington's attitude to-night only confirmed my opinion."

"Go on! I like to hear you talk."

"Am I being 'foolish,' to use your own word?"

"Oh, no. Seventy-and-seven years in the wilderness would not change your mentality, which is that of the Army officer plus the country gentleman. Spot and I sense a rogue at the first whiff. You cannot do that, nor ever will. For Heaven's sake get Mr. Leslie to tie up your hundred thousand in such a wise that you yourself will never be able to touch more than the accrued interest, or some smooth-tongued rascal, more likely an adventuress, will wheedle the lot out of you.

"Now, I suppose you want me to discourse, and persuade that stiff Scottish neck of yours to bend meekly under the yoke. I'll do nothing of the sort. Your case has complexities which appeal, so I'm not going to drop it. But I'll give you a word of advice. You have just bought a two-seater car, you say. Why don't you and Spot hop into it for a fortnight's tour? England is quite beautiful, I'm told. Naturally I never see a genuine landscape, because in my rare trips out of London my mind is occupied with something of more immediate importance than the loveliness of the Thames Valley or the blended tints of the New Forest. . . .

"Well, here we are at the 'Yard.' Don't come in. It would give you the pip. There are times when my brain reels at the mere sight of it, yet I resemble those poor wretches at the Gamma-Delta Club, who, when driven out from its familiar gloom, will seek another precisely similar den of iniquity. It's a disease, of which the symptoms vary. *They* hanker after drugs and crime. *I* can't even pass a country police station without looking in at the window and sympathising with some worried inspector addling what he calls his wits to find out who stole those ducks from the pond at the Manor House."

Panton ought to have realised by this time that when

Furneaux was rattling off nonsense in that way he was actually rather elated because some carefully planned *coup* had come off. And he had good reason to be excited at that moment. He had scared Connington out into the open. Others would take up the chase. Before morning the "Yard" would know where the man lived. They knew already that he had received a letter bearing the Mallaig postmark. They counted on some action on his part that would betray a guilty conscience. If he had wilfully encompassed John Panton's ruin he would see the uplifted hand of remorseless retribution in the alliance between his victim and the C.I.D. In literal fact, Connington did behave like a vicious-minded criminal in his treatment of a former superior. Suppose the procedure were reversed? Suppose John had met a disgraced Connington in Canada—a reliable and experienced non-commissioned officer utterly broken for one lapse—would he have spurned and insulted him? Weigh the two men against each other in that balance, and John's end of the scale fell with a clang.

Panton missed a great deal, if not all, of this. Nevertheless the notion of an uncharted run in the car through rural England struck home. Spot and he would have the time of their lives. They could halt where they liked and live as they liked. If benighted, it would, indeed, be a strange part of the land from which a rabbit could not be induced to sizzle on the end of a stick before a camp fire. Besides, there were always village inns and farmhouses. Before they reached Wimbledon the scheme was decided on.

It seemed that Mr. Leslie approved, whereas May eyed John suspiciously. She was sure he had something up his sleeve more than a mere gallivanting off with the dog in a poky little car where there was hardly space to

swing a cat—indeed, not any space for that quaint operation if Spot were a passenger.

"How long will you be away, John?" was her first question.

"Mr. Furneaux suggested a fortnight."

"Did he? Why does he want to get rid of you?"

"He regards me as a pig-headed person who invariably looks on the dark side of life. Of course, he spared my feelings by not saying that, but I don't think I have misrepresented his real opinion.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. He alluded vaguely to the Thames Valley and the New Forest. That will be a start, anyhow."

"You'll let us know where you are every day?"

"Y—yes."

"Why hesitate? We must have an address for letters. Uncle may want to wire you. Besides, it'll be August now any minute. You might like to break off your solitary wanderings and join us at Deauville."

"Join us where, did you say?" demanded Leslie severely.

"Deauville, darling. Haven't we told you? Auntie and I have it all planned out, and Sir Arthur Frensham thinks he can manage to get across soon after the close of some cattle show in which he is interested."

Mrs. Leslie looked up from her sewing.

"May, dear," she said timidly, "your uncle and I have not discussed August yet. Sir Arthur and you spoke about Deauville to some people at Hurlingham, but I hardly followed the conversation. Where is Deauville? In France, I suppose. And what does one do there?"

"Pay," said Leslie. "Spend money like a rich maniac.

Think again, May. I'm not wasting half a year's income for the sake of hobnobbing with the Portuguese, the Argentines, and the Greeks."

"All right, nunky," said May, dismissing the matter as if it were of no consequence. "Deauville is off, then. How about Margate? Let's fix on somewhere soon so that John can arrange his dates."

"Margate used to be a charming place," sighed Mrs. Leslie. "David and I went there for our honeymoon—didn't we, dear?"

Dear David snorted and glared at his Canadian niece. She rose, hummed and danced the latest fox-trot while crossing the room, and seated herself at an *escritoire*. She wrote a letter to "Dear Arthur." Its only material passage ran as follows:

"I've broken the ice about Deauville to Uncle David. Ice is a poor simile, because he boiled over at once. But I think it will be all right. I happen to know that he cleaned up a pot of money on a 'bus amalgamation scheme the other day. Besides, it needn't cost such a heap if we go the right way to work. I'll keep you wise."

John was glad of the interlude. It saved him from committing another blunder, because he nearly blurted out that he expected neither letters nor telegrams, since there was hardly a soul in the wide world who would wish to communicate with him.

He got away early next morning, and, going by way of Staines and Reading, found himself in Oxford that night. He turned North from Reading by the accident of taking the wrong read. After that, he had no uncertainty as to his line. Given freedom of choice the Scot heads for his own land with the homing instinct of a carrier pigeon. True, there were deviations, from

Stratford-on-Avon to the Wye and Chester, and thence to Selby in Yorkshire to avoid the manufacturing districts. But he was in Windermere on the fourth day after leaving London. There he halted, meaning to give Spot a couple of days on the hills. He had telegraphed to Wimbledon each morning, but always vaguely, indicating a general direction. Were he turning the Swiss Cantons his address might well have been "Excelsior." At Windermere, however, he named an hotel. That evening, after returning from Grasmere and a glorious ramble over Helvellyn, where Spot was so fascinated by sight of a collie rounding up some moorland sheep that he had to be spoken to almost harshly, he received a telegram.

"Two letters from Inverlochtie posted. Reserving rooms at Deauville Hotel 31st. Will you join us?—Leslie."

It was then July 26, a day of utmost significance in John's life did he but know it. Unquestionably it was the break at Windermere, and the fact that he got in touch there with his friends once more that caused all sorts of things to happen and prevented many other sorts of things from happening. Among minor achievements it dissipated May Leslie's visions of a conquering career at the fashionable French seaside resort of the hour. This, however, like the weather forecast, is merely an intelligent anticipation of future events.

"Letters from Inverlochtie!"

John dwelt long on the words. Who had written? There were pros and cons in regard to three persons—his father, Alistair, and Eileen. At that time he knew nothing of Cousin Betty's whereabouts, and the Lansings were mere names. He saw, however, the futility of speculating as to the possible identity of his corre-

spondents. It was a good instance of David Leslie's shrewd foresight that he should specify the exact number of letters. Not for him could a careless telegraphist substitute a singular for a plural. So John replied:

"Shall await letters. May not make Deauville 31st, but certainly later. Do not reserve rooms. Intend touring Normandy during your stay."

Obviously, there would be a heap of people in such a place with whom he had been acquainted, and he was as sensitive as ever in his dread of being recognised and pointed at by sensation mongers.

After dinner, luckily, there was a run round the lake in a steamer. That, and a quiet stroll under the stars, brought him to bedtime. He was up early, but there were no letters. The hotel manager assured him that the second London delivery might be expected by 10:30 a.m., and it was no new occurrence that the mails crossing London should be delayed in that way. And, behold, a large registered letter was handed to John shortly before eleven o'clock.

It contained two closed letters bearing the Inverlochtie postmark. Both were in feminine handwriting, but one was from Eileen! It says a good deal for John's self-restraint that he refrained from tearing open that envelope until he had read Mr. Leslie's brief covering note. The lawyer expressed his pleasure at receiving a possible address, because the letters from the north had arrived that morning.

"You will have gathered from my telegram that my extravagant niece has had her way," he went on. "We are almost committed to some hotel at Deauville at an outrageous price. My telegram says, 'Reserving rooms,' but I have really wired to ask if rooms *can* be reserved. I have not the slightest doubt as to the answer. I'll be

lucky if they don't say the rates have gone up ten per cent. in the interim. One word more—keep away from Inverlochtié.”

Now, John had no intention whatsoever of going to Inverlochtié. If he followed the general line of the Caledonian Canal he would pass twenty-five miles south of his old home. It was worth the journey if only he might breathe the air of the Highlands once more, tramp over the heather beyond Inverness, and then turn his back on Scotland and all that it signified in curiously mingled memories of happiness and ignominy.

His cautious friend's advice was probably in his mind when he found himself gazing spell-bound at the few lines Eileen had written. They ran:

“Dear John—I have been hoping against hope to hear from you. I make no complaint on that score, because you, like me, may be the victim of cruel deceit. That is why I am writing now. I know some of the truth, but not all, so we *must* meet. Will you come here, or shall I come to London?

The place is immaterial to me. The only important thing is that it shall be soon. You may understand more clearly if I tell you that I am leaving Inverlochtié at the earliest possible moment. To some extent the exact date depends on you—on what you and I have to say to each other, I mean.

If you write or wire direct you must, I fear, use the name which I shall discard for ever within a few days. I say this because I wish to get away without a scene, and want to avoid giving your father heedless pain, while a communication addressed to “Eileen Grant” might evoke comment. So I prefer that you should send Betty Bridgnorth a message. She is

staying here and is fully in my confidence. If you see why I hate to have you even write to me as other than the girl you have always written to—well, that should explain much.—I am, yours as ever, Eileen Grant.”

Now such a letter meant everything or nothing. From Eileen it meant everything. John’s eyes could be stern or tender. They revealed each mood more than once while he read. And passion flamed in them, too.

“Keep away from Inverlochtié,” Leslie had said.

“Is it possible to hire an aeroplane here?” was John’s instant question to a hall porter,

CHAPTER XIII

REINFORCEMENTS

No, there was no aeroplane available at Windermere that day. "Now, only last week——"

"Oh, the devil fly away with your last week!" growled John, expressing himself colloquially and not intending any slur on aviation.

Then he remembered the second letter. It was from Cousin Betty, who wrote exactly as she spoke:

"Eileen is shoving a screed in the post for you to-day. It goes from Macdonald's place. We don't trust the letter-box at the house. I know what is in it—in Eileen's letter, I mean. As a properly brought-up member of the clan I bid you scoot back to Canada by the next boat. As your cousin and Eileen's pal I think you had better come here, have a long jaw with Eileen, and give Alistair the jolly good hiding he deserves. I'm sorry for Uncle Hector, but he has to go through life's little troubles like the rest of us. So, of course, I shall be seeing you soon, unless you have developed what I call the 'Panton kink.' But you haven't. That was a joyous chit you sent the Asp. Isn't he a worm?"

John's mind was in a whirl of emotions, a weird jumble of fantastic ideas with definite calculations of times and distances. But he did try to act sensibly. With Spot at his heels (for a wonder, a rather fashion-

able hotel had allowed master and dog to share a room) he retired to a quiet corner of the lounge and examined a road map. Of course, he had glanced before at the main routes across the border, and thence into Scotland as far as the Bridge of Orchy; he knew every inch of the country beyond. But to these technical details he was now devoting a fury of impatience to be speeding on his way which might in itself prove the worst sort of hindrance. He was well aware of that drawback. Many a time had he pored over an artillery map in Flanders when the very air was being rent by high explosives and one never knew the second that a stealthy gas wave might spread through the trench and put an end for ever to a reliable adjustment of intersecting angles. The training of war came in usefully now. His eyes conveyed the sought-for information to some competent part of his brain while the rest of his faculties were conning all manner of fanciful questions, none of which could he possibly answer with accuracy.

He could determine, for instance, that the round hundred miles between Gretna Green and Stirling offered by far the best, if slightly the longest, motoring road; with luck, he could cover the run from Windermere before it was dark. An early start next morning should bring him to Mallaig about midday, so there should be no difficulty in wiring Betty the approximate hour of his arrival.

Although he knew it was foolish John could not help asking himself what sudden crisis had arisen at Inverlochtié that not only called him to Eileen's side but demanded the wreaking of physical vengeance on Alis-tair? What irresistible influence had brought Betty Bridgnorth into Eileen's camp? He had a vague memory of some love passages years ago between her and

Cousin Alistair, but they came to nothing and were never regarded as really serious by other relatives. Above all, what did Eileen's letter mean? Her very outspokenness offered a sort of veil. Was she literally bidding him take her away from her own people? With a strangely vivid flash of recollection the words of the grey-haired train conductor on the C.P.R. recurred.

"I'd go straight an' see the girl," the man had said, having cogitated John's hypothetical case from the recaptured view-point of a long vanished youth, "an' if she was agreeable I'd kick the other guy round the block, an' take her away from him, an' not all the Acts of Parliament in the Law Library at Ottawa would stop me!"

It would seem that the Canadian Pacific Railway Company ran a side-line of prophets as part of their Transcontinental service. No seer since the time of Isaiah had foretold the course of events more accurately than that friendly conductor.

But John decided rather wisely that it was better to be up and doing than searching a woman's written word for the secret thoughts of her heart. She might whisper, she would never write them. His immediate business was to compose telegrams. The first was to Betty. It kept strictly to the point.

"The two letters reached me here, Windermere, at eleven this morning. God willing, I shall be in Mallaig by noon to-morrow. Travelling by car. Leave letter or other message care of Post Office, Mallaig."

He did not sign his name. Eileen had expressed her dislike for any form of scandalous publicity, and Betty could make no mistake as to the sender of the telegram. Then he tackled a longer explanation to Leslie.

"Letters from the north were from Eileen and my cousin, Betty Bridgnorth. They indicate complete break and call urgently for my presence. My address, until further notice, is care of Post Office, Mallaig. Conditions obviously forbid visit to Deauville, but shall endeavour to follow your advice in most matters. I shall keep you informed of developments. Perhaps Mr. Furneaux should be told."

Anyone who read these telegrams must surely have been convinced of John's patent honesty of purpose. The appeal for the sanction of Providence in the first, the naïve reservation in the second, shrieked the evidence aloud. Even David Leslie's legal features ought to relax in a grim smile when he learnt that his client intended to disobey him in nearly every particular except, perhaps, the avoidance of the crowning folly of assailing Alistair.

This preliminary staff work was accomplished in fifteen minutes. Then Spot and his master took the road. There are few more interesting runs than that through Ambleside and Grasmere, with their memories of Ruskin and Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey, up the long hill of Dunmail Raise, and so on to Penrith and Carlisle. But John's eyes were set steadfastly on milestones and sign-posts, while Spot, no doubt, scanning the stark hills, expected to find snow lying on the next slope. Not for them were the beauties of lake and fell or the stirring legends told in the border ballads. They had a purpose, and would have achieved it had not a butcher's boy at Fort William put John's car out of commission by his careless handling of a lively cob. By a miracle, no one was hurt, though the smash was thorough enough, both delivery van and car losing a wheel. Worse still, the differential was

broken. With the boy was an Airedale, who seemed to be enraged by the accident, so John's first anxiety, after extricating himself from the wreck, was to rescue this warrior from a sudden and violent death, because Spot was righteously indignant about the whole affair.

A crowd gathered, and not even the local *esprit de corps*, nowhere stronger than in Scotland, could exonerate the young butcher when a policeman began to record events. John, of course, had to produce his license.

"Panton?" commented the man. "John Bridgnorth Panton? Ye'll be Lord Oban's son, juist hame frae Canada, I'm thenkin'?"

"Is that any business of yours?" demanded John, now thoroughly annoyed, since a score of ears must have heard the question, and some of those present doubtless remembered him. The policeman stood his ground.

"It's a matter o' identity, ye ken. This smash has to be inquired intil by they insurance companies," he explained.

"Very well. You are right. But I'm due at Mallaig within a couple of hours. For goodness' sake direct me to a garage where I can hire another car."

A man came forward. He owned a garage, but a flock of tourists had commandeered every car in Fort William for the day. The informant, however, would undertake to look after and repair the damaged two-seater. As for Mallaig, a train would leave for that terminus in forty minutes and arrive there before noon.

John smiled then. All was well. He would keep his tryst. Seeing the butcher's boy dabbing a cut on his forehead with a handkerchief he handed over a pound note.

"There," he said, "use that as a plaster. I think your pony was mostly to blame. Tell your master

that if he is anything out of pocket he's to let me know, and I'll make good his loss."

The policeman began to think about this time that he had been "barking up the wrong tree," as the apt American phrase has it. Nevertheless, his soul hungered after additional notes.

"That's a bonny dog o' yours, sir—what is he?" he inquired.

"A Glasgow porridge-hound," said John, in whose brain some tiny nerve jangled a warning. Fort William guffawed at the quip, for the joke had a tang of true Highland contempt for the Lowlander.

"He looks like one o' they foreigners frae China," persisted the other.

"That's what the butcher's Airedale thought a few minutes ago. You saw what a bloomer he made!"

That ended the inquisition, and John was free to gather his belongings and get help to carry them to the station. The train left on time, so further delay was highly improbable. It was unfortunate, of course, that his passing through Fort William should be blazoned far and wide in this fashion, since that was the inevitable sequel, as he well knew. If fugitives from justice had ever grasped the essential fact that they were vastly safer in a crowded city than in the remote corners of the earth they would escape more frequently. In London very man is a stranger once he leaves his own door. In Fort William, as in this instance, not even a dog can pass without being noticed. It was quite certain that a collision, a dog fight, and the return of the heir to Inverlochtié, all bound up together, would cross the county from sea to sea before nightfall.

That persistent policeman thought it his duty to see

John and Spot safely off the premises, so he strolled into the station a few minutes before the train departed. He observed that the two were travelling first-class, and was passing along the platform towards the exit when someone hailed him from a third-class carriage.

"Isn't that man with the dog the Honourable John Panton?" came the muttered demand.

"Yes," said the policeman.

"I thought so. He's the blighter who was dismissed from the Army in 1918 for cowardice in front of the enemy. If he hadn't a good pull somewhere he would have been shot."

Now, the Fort William constabulary may be inquisitive, but they are loyal, and their representative in the railway station that morning thought that the dissipated-looking person who made these disparaging remarks should not be encouraged.

"Aiblins ye're mista'en, mister," he siad.

"And aiblins I'm not," retorted the other. "I can't imagine how he dare show his nose here, but he'll be about as popular at Inverlochtié as a mad jackal, which is what his confounded dog looks like."

"Ay, mebbe. I dinna ken much about they jackals. Ha'e they twa legs, or four?"

"Four, like a jackass."

The policeman stuck his head through the open window, and affected surprise at discovering that Pantón's scathing critic was a biped. It was a neat bit of comedy. In reality he wanted to find out exactly how deponent was dressed, and make a note of him, because, speaking candidly, he didn't like his haggard face and staring eyes.

"Nae doot ye'll ha'e met Mr. Pantón i' Canada?" he said.

"No. I met him in hell, and wish he had stopped there."

The train moved on. Out came the note-book, and the whole conversation went into it. Not many days later Furneaux vowed that the dialogue was crisp and thoroughly to the point.

John caught a distant glimpse of his birthplace as the train wound its way through the tumbled hills. Although Inverlochtié was fully ten miles from Mallaig, the railway at the watershed passed within three miles, but the lie of the land and the head of a broad sea-water loch made communication from that point almost impracticable.

On the lake he saw a smart steam launch, an innovation eloquent of the new money Leslie had spoken of. Its presence induced memories of his Army career. The family was so poor then that his private allowance was negligible. During his brief periods of leave from the front he had to consider carefully such items of expenditure as railway fares and hotel bills. It would seem that while he had been experiencing the seven lean years his father and Alistair had enjoyed the seven fat ones. In Pharaoh's dream the periods were consecutive. In the drab reality of life they were concurrent.

Well, he wished no man evil, but it was high time his luck changed. Something was going to happen now, at any rate.

Perhaps he was acting precipitately. His presence at Mallaig, even though he went not a yard nearer Inverlochtié, would send a modern species of fiery cross blazing through the glen. Would it not have been more prudent had he accepted Eileen's own alternative and arranged to meet her in London? Well, here was Mallaig. He had crossed the Rubicon. Having no boats

to burn he filled his pipe, grabbed his kit, and was marching down the platform when he came face to face with Eileen herself.

They recognised each other instantly, and both were greatly startled. John stood stock still, a good-sized bag in his left hand, a smaller one and Spot's leash in his right, and the pipe clenched hard between his teeth. The colour fled from the girl's cheeks. She stared at him so forlornly that Mary Lansing, who happened to catch her friend's faint gasp which was half a sob, cried in surprise:

"My hat, Eileen, what's the matter? First time I've ever known you nervy. The kiddies are here, dearest. I told you they would be at the far end of the train. Mademoiselle Céleste was once in a bad railway smash in France, and insists now on travelling in the last coach. She doesn't believe me when I assure her—oh, is *that* it?"

For John had dropped both bags, stuffed the lighted pipe into a pocket with sublime indifference to the nearness of a box of matches, and clasped Eileen's faltering hand in both his.

"You dear girl!" he cried. "How fine of you to meet me! And, oh, how good it is to see you!"

Poor Eileen said nothing. Her eyes filled with tears. The mere sight of him flooded her with happiness. It was not the sort of greeting she had planned, but the station was momentarily thronged, and more than half the people present knew both John and herself. Somehow, too, she felt that he would understand. How big, and strong, and confident he looked! Here was a man whose soul shone through his worshipping gaze. Could she really have doubted him? Well, thank Heaven, *that* phase had passed for ever!

She murmured his name and Lady Lansing's brokenly. Her friend, of course, showed perfect tact.

"I am so glad to have met you at last, Mr. Panton," she purred delightedly. "Forgive me if I rush away for a minute. My three chicks are here, and I see that their governess is demanding what she calls their *petites valises* from the rear van, while, as you know, the luggage is put in the front one as being vastly more convenient."

In those few words she had inferred everything—complete knowledge, full sympathy, unstinted welcome.

Eileen was finding her tongue at last when Spot growled. It was his way of saying:

"Look out! There's someone here who is not a friend."

In the conditions John was hardly to be blamed if he paid no heed to the warning. He was in Scotland, not in Northern Alberta. Moreover, was he not glowering at Eileen? So Spot growled again.

"What's gone wrong with *you*?" demanded his master amusedly. "Eileen, I do believe my pal here is jealous . . . Spot, you rascal, shake a paw!"

Spot almost sighed. But it was too late now. That obvious "bad man" he had met the other evening was lost already in the crowd of passengers. So he looked up at Eileen, smiled (every dog-lover knows that a dog can smile), and was properly introduced, because Eileen stooped to pat him, and passed the orthodox remarks:

"What a darling! What *is* he?"

"Your devoted slave and most trustworthy protector from this moment henceforth," said John. "Spot! You see this lady? Put your hand on your heart and vow you'll be true to her for ever!"

Spot rose instantly on his hind legs, placed his left

paw on Eileen's arm, carried his right paw across his breast, and barked. May Leslie had not seen that trick. Possibly, were she present just then, she might have been "peevied."

But Eileen was recovering her wits. There was so much to say and so little time in which to say it. John's unexpected arrival by the train had upset such tentative plans as Betty and she had deemed feasible. Scores of eyes had witnessed their meeting. Scores of tongues would soon be canvassing it. Mary Lansing had come in from Inverlochtie in her own car to fetch her children and the governess. It was natural enough that Eileen should accompany her, and equally reasonable that Betty should remain at home, since six passengers, plus the chauffeur, was one beyond normal capacity. Eileen had ascertained already that "Mr. Panton" had not received the letter awaiting him at the Post Office. Therefore, he was not yet in Mallaig. She would have contrived an excuse for a second inquiry. Her letter suggested that John should come on to Inverlochtie that evening. Postmaster Macdonald would find him a room and house his car, while the two girls would stroll out after dinner and meet him beneath Ian's Leap, a rocky promontory so called because some hard-pressed cateran of great local celebrity two hundred years ago had taken a flying leap from its edge, landed in deep water, and swam to safety on the other side of the loch before his pursuers could man a boat.

Now there was no car, unless Fergusson, at the inn, could bring him out in the one and only practicable Ford the village boasted.

Eileen and John had their separate stories to tell. They were making heavy weather of it when Mary Lansing came with her brood, which she promptly

shepherded in the direction of the waiting car. She might be trusted to realise that introductions were not the order of the day at that moment.

Overhearing the talk, she took charge at once.

"Céleste has brought a wardrobe trunk," she said. "And Moira is sporting one also—her first. The car simply cannot hold us and the baggage—there's heaps more of it. So Robinson must make a second trip. I'll tell him to be here about six, and that he's to drop you at Macdonald's place."

So it was settled that way. John parted from Eileen five minutes after he had grasped her hand. It was a brief greeting after seven years of exile. But it sufficed. The heart, the brain, can far outpace the spoken word.

He stored his handbags with the Lansing pile, walked out when the car had gone, and retrieved his letter. In addition to its instructions it contained one puzzling paragraph:

"I want to prepare you, John dear, for a question which I must put and you must answer. Are you innocent or guilty? Not until after I was wheedled into marrying Alistair was I told why you left the Service. I suppose it is true—the actual verdict of the court-martial, I mean? But was it justified? If you say 'No' I shall believe you against all the world; if 'Yes'—well, I go my own way. I would not express my innermost thought thus openly if I had not seen what you wrote to your father, backed up, as it is, by your speedy response to my own and Betty's letters. Perhaps you may be forced to tell me that which will nearly break my heart to know. In that case, if you would be

kind, and that you have always been, you will not come to Inverlochtié at all, but write me a little word of farewell, and, I might almost add, forgiveness, because, no matter what the first cause of our separation, you stood fast, while I seemed to waver."

"So that's the trouble, is it?" mused John, while he and Spot made for the local hotel bent on luncheon. "What the deuce am I to say? Can a man be guilty of a crime he did not know he was committing? Of course, that only makes out he was suffering from temporary insanity, a poor excuse for suicide. But should he put out of court the fairly definite opinions of such friends, old and new, as Frensham, Leslie and Furneaux, not to speak of Mr. Winter and Mr. Mountford? No. A thousand times 'No.' I've been all sorts of a fool not to believe more in myself. I stop that idiocy now, straight off. As soon as I arrange things with Eileen I'll rush south, find that blighter Connington, and crack his ribs until he blurts out the truth. Why in the world didn't I listen to Furneaux? He is the lad who sized up Connington, though Mountford, K.C., had a sort of inkling of the facts long ago . . . 'Facts!' That's a hard word, isn't it, Spot? I often wonder, old scout, if your instinct isn't a much more reliable guide than what I am pleased to call my reason."

Spot, of course, was convinced of this already. Short of breaking loose from his master in the station and sinking his teeth into some part of the anatomy of ex-Company Sergeant-Major Ferdinand Connington, how could he have done more to announce the fellow's presence in Mallaig?

But Spot's intelligence was limited to his immediate environment. Even he could not guess that Connington

was then bargaining for the use of Ferguson's Ford and would be well on the way to Inverlochti before master and dog had decided what to eat.

It happened that "Dopey Walker" was momentarily in possession of his senses. He had enforced abstinence in the train by leaving his drug behind. He was nervous and irritable and ready to snarl at anyone, but his brain was sufficiently clear that it should sense the far-reaching hazard of John Panton's return to England, and, above all, of this unforeseen visit to the west coast of Inverness. He took stock of the meeting in the station and had seen in Eileen's eyes the look which women of her class give to one man only. That was illuminating but quiet surprising.

Before passing the ticket barrier he sought enlightenment from a porter, paying the way with a florin.

"Yon leddy?" said the man. "Yon's Mrs. Panton, an' the body wi' the bairns is Lady Lansing."

"Mrs. Panton? Do you mean Mrs. John Panton?"

"Hoots' mon; that's a queer thing ye've said. She's Mrs. Alistair Panton—Miss Eileen Grant, of Glen Iver, that was—an by the same token I'm danged if there isn't Mr. John himself, leading a braw dog. Weel, weel! Wunners'll never cease!"

A glance at the waiting car told more of the story. From a distance, Connington noted who went in it. Then he sought a car on his own account. It was high time he had a settlement with Alistair Panton, and if he played his cards well this strange visit of Lord Oban's son to his old home might be all to the good. At any rate, the Honourable John was not going post-haste to Inverlochti, and that was significant. Did John's cousin even know that he was in the North at all? Well, that point could be determined soon—almost as

soon as Ferguson could deposit the tale-bearer at Alis-tair's door.

John was at luncheon, Spot aiding and abetting, when a telegraph messenger sought him. The boy brought a wire from Leslie. It ran:—

“Need hardly say I disapprove strongly. Even now advise instant return. Have telephoned F., who wishes me to tell you that Connington has left London for Mallaig, and will probably arrive before noon to-day.”

A passing waiter was startled by John's exclamation, which seemed to be directed at the sheet of pink paper in his hand. He was not any wiser when he heard the man say to the dog:

“So that is why you gave tongue, pup? Great Scott! To think I'd turn a deaf ear after all that you and I have gone through together. Never again, believe me!”

CHAPTER XIV

THE LULL BEFORE A STORM

JOHN was "acquaint' wi' Mallaig," so he picked up Connington's trail within five minutes. The station porter yielded part of the story and Fergusson's inn the rest. Connington's description was recognized promptly. The real problem then was to decide how to act for the best.

The heir to Inverlochtie was by no manner of means temperamental. True, he had acquiesced rather too easily in his own downfall, and had remained a pessimist, almost a stubborn one, when indications were not lacking in these later days that his fortunes might be improved. But the cold-blooded censor who condemned him on such a count could never have made full allowance for the blind-eyed misery which overwhelms a youth of high spirit and untarnished character when a number of men of his own race and rank and class find him guilty of cowardice. The mere charge is odious; it leaves a lasting stain even if shown to be absolutely unfounded. When it is brought home, and a really merciful penalty is inflicted, the injury is mortal. John Panton himself stated the cold truth in the letter to his father; time might "sear" the wound but could never heal it.

Nevertheless, the alchemy of a woman's love had achieved marvels that day. Eileen's few broken words, the happiness shining from her tear-dimmed eyes, had sent a new ichor pulsing through John's veins. For the

first time he believed that he might actually be innocent—that some noxious plot had ruined and nearly killed him—that Eileen's long fight on behalf of her childhood's sweetheart had at last earned its reward, though she, poor girl, had not escaped the bitter cost Connington and Alistair was almost proved now. One of the conspirators was blackmailing the other. Of course, there was no definite evidence available yet which would be accepted by any court, whether military or civil, but the veiled inferences drawn by Mr. Mountford, a skilled lawyer and former Judge Advocate-General, by David Leslie, shrewd observer of men and affairs during a generation, and by two experienced officers of the C.I.D. were daily becoming more and more demonstrable.

In his new-born confidence John did not act precipitately. He resolved at once not to send a warning telegram to Eileen or Betty. It would be quite impossible to explain Connington's presence in ambiguous sentences. Probably neither girl had ever heard of the man, whose sinister though nebulous figure could not be fitted into any picture drawn in their mind's eyes by the sort of guarded statement which alone could go over the wires.

John, seated with Spot on the sea-front and gazing fixedly across a sunlit ocean at a faint blur on the horizon which he knew were the islands of Eigg and Rum, was struck forcibly by the similarity between his physical sight of these remote isles and his spiritual vision of affairs at Inverlochtié. He had often mulled over both islands, and could fill in their dream-like outlines with small bays, bold promontories, scattered houses, and a few rough tracks. His knowledge of the people

much closer at hand was far more precise. Could he not envisage their thoughts and actions during the next few hours?

Yes. He thought he might venture to base his own conduct on the likelihood of certain things happening ten miles away. So he abandoned any effort to leave Mallaig before the time suggested by Lady Lansing. Alistair, of course, would be forewarned, but what sort of armour could he gird on to resist the arrows of anxiety, of uncertainty, of failure to anticipate whence the next shaft might come? Not one of the three women would enlighten him. The chauffeur, governess and children would be most misleading witnesses, because they knew nothing. If Eileen had bidden old Donald Macdonald, the postmaster, keep a still tongue, which she surely had done, no wiles of Alistair's would extract any information from him.

So, whittled down in that way, the position became fairly simple. Connington would be closeted with Alistair, but neither could say for certain that John was at this, that, or the other place. Some hours would pass and yet the expected attack would not be made. That must worry Alistair. Twelve years ago he and not John was the neurotic. He fretted like a spoiled child if a mist came on and they temporarily lost their way among the heather. When a gillie was late with a luncheon basket he would fume in ill-temper lest the man should not appear at all, and then rate him soundly for a delay which might be explained by some trivial mischance. Why should he have changed with the passing years?

Of course, a messenger might be despatched to Mallaig to spy out the enemy's forces—might, indeed, come in by Lady Lansing's car. Well, that could be provided

against, too. John actually laughed as he nudged Spot with a toe.

"We're becoming Machiavellian, pup, you and I," he chortled. "I think I must model myself on that queer little chap, Furneaux. Someone has laid down the law that it is the unexpected that happens. Furneaux goes one better. *He* is the unexpected. He does it."

Spot raised one ear and his eyebrows became triangles. When master used that light-hearted tone it generally meant, in the vernacular known of all dogs and sportsmen, that there was "something doing." Otherwise he continued to show deep interest in the tiny inhabitants of a clump of tall grasses right in front of his nose. The rocky west coast of Scotland produced an entirely different organisation of little creatures from that which patronised the shores of Moose Lake.

Moreover, the water curling in over the weed and pebbles with such blustering regularity had a new smell and a quite unpleasing taste. He remembered sampling it the first day he set eyes on the British Isles and he did not like its flavour at all. Nevertheless, from what he had seen of Northern England and Scotland this country was a fine place for a dog, while the meals were excellent, though served without the least effort on his part. Moreover, there were signs of good hunting, since he had winded both deer and grouse on the moors.

So, taking things by and large, John and Spot were rather satisfied with life that afternoon. About three o'clock, the islands of Eigg and Rum showing no disposition to move, though changing colour a little as the sun swung into the west, the two strolled back to the hotel near the station and secured a room, to be at their disposal until further notice. Then they interviewed

the porter, and arranged that John's small kit should go with Lady Lansing's unless the order was countermanded before the car left. Later they sent a telegram to Mr. Leslie, took tea, and hired a bicycle.

Now, Spot had watched and thoroughly disapproved of many bicycles and motor-cycles, but he had never imagined that his master would take to any infernal machine of the sort. Therefore, when John mounted, and rode a little way out of the town, Spot eyed him so narrowly, in quite obvious expectation of his falling off, that John wobbled badly during the first few yards. However, mutual confidence was restored after a time, and Spot enjoyed the gallop.

John pulled up where a small wooded cliff overhung the road. He and Spot, with the bicycle, were soon under cover. In about half an hour Lady Lansing's car came in sight. Robinson, the chauffeur, was alone, so John hailed him. The man halted rather unwillingly, but John soon convinced him that the variation of programme was capable of explanation.

"I may as well tell you at once that my visit to Inverlochtié will not be quite popular with some members of my family," he said. "In fact, had anyone accompanied you I would have biked all the way, as I'm staying at the post-office to-night, and do not wish my presence to be known generally until to-morrow. In the conditions, Spot and I will wait here till you come back with the assorted packages, mine among the others—the porter has the ticket—and pick us up. You might drop us at the head of the loch and leave my two bags with Macdonald. I'll not hurry. You should be at the house about the time I reach old Mac's place."

"You, of course, sir, are Mr. John Pantón?" inquired Robinson.

"Yes," smiled John. "I ought to have begun by telling you that."

"Oh, I'd know you anywhere from his lordship," said the man, and the mere comment showed how little he was versed in local scandals. "But I have a note for you from Miss Betty."

John had plenty of time to read and consider Betty's letter while the car sped to and from Mallaig. Its news might have been foreseen and discounted, but the meeting with Eileen had blinded John's eyes to all possibilities except those in accord with her wishes, whatever they might be.

So his face darkened somewhat as he read:

"Of course, you have arrived by the first train. Now that you are here I shall be relieved if you hop it by the next one. I don't suppose you will do anything of the sort, but my pious hope should be registered by the Recording Angel as a plea that I tried hard to stop the mischief which, I fear, I helped to start. Well, that is my last growl. For the rest, I am with Eileen and you to the death.

"I'm useful in a scrap, but, all the same, you had better be prepared for ructions. Some bad lad turned up here to-day in Fergusson's 'bus. We were at luncheon when his card was brought to Alistair, and I thought for a moment that our troubles were about to end, because the Asp's red face grew purple and then mauve. However, he went out, but not before Uncle Hector had asked who the visitor was. Alistair is evidently losing his nerve; he could not prevent dear old Timms from answering: 'A Mr. Ferdinand Connington, milord.' Your father seemed to recognise the name at once. 'What does that man want here?' he

demanded. You remember the lairdish voice, don't you? Were you there the day some unfortunate Southerner bowled over a doe when only stags were to be taken? 'Who fired that shot?' said his lordship, and the poor fellow ran home five miles. Alistair recovered slightly, and said he would go and see, but Oban followed. None of us understood what all the blessed fuss was about until old Timms whispered in my ear afterwards that someone named Connington, he had been told years ago, was the chief witness against Master John.

"Luckily the Lansings were wrapped up in their three charming kiddies, so Eileen and I carried on valiantly. For all that, Reginald is getting hot under the collar. I can see him bolting elsewhere any minute.

"There must have been a short but spirited confab in the hall, because Alistair and Mr. Ferdinand Connington walked into the village, and Oban crossed the loch in the direction of Glen Inver. That forbodes a council of war to-night; he is sure to bring Colonel Grant back with him. And, just to thicken the plot, Timms confided that the Asp gave Brown a letter some mornings ago which, he said, he had forgotten to post overnight. That wasn't true, of course. A. was terrified lest your father should have written you without consulting him, and he wanted to examine every letter in the bag. I happened to twig that part of it. But the amazing coincidence is that when Alistair produced his missing letter out of a pocket it was addressed to this very man Connington.

"I think you ought to know these things, so I write them, as Mary Lansing has explained the car-and-baggage scheme. Of course, I had business in the village about three o'clock, and saw Ferdinand supporting a barrel of potatoes outside Minter's, the new grocer,

who married one of the Stewart girls. I cannot connect the fellow with his surname, which is rather swank, Ferdinando? Yes. A splendid fit, followed by de Silva or Goldamo. But not Connington. He has the look of an ex-Service man suffering from alternate attacks of shell-shock and D.T.'s. You have not forgotten, I'm sure, that I had an unholy experience in Italy during the war, so I know a bit about both those diseases.

"That's all. Nothing I can say will prevent you from arriving at Macdonald's place. Luckily, it is round the corner and two hundred yards away from Minter's, but I'm told you have brought with you some wretched hound which advertises you over two parishes at a time. And have Eileen and you settled what you are going to do? That's a stupid question, I know, seeing that you only exchanged about six words, most of hers being choked with tears, I understand. Why do some women want to weep when—— Oh, well, I'd better shut up. I *may* see you to-night, but I shouldn't be in the least surprised if the house is barricaded inside and out before dinner.

"P. S.—I am writing this behind my locked door. From my window I can see Alistair deep in consultation with the village constable, a dour Aberdonian, who, by the way, has never met you. I wish I dared sic him on to Ferdinando."

Betty's budget was of some importance—far greater importance than either she or John could possibly imagine at the moment. But its immediate purpose stuck out like Ben Nevis over the rest of the Grampian Hills. It was to warn him that, by some mischance, hostile influences were afoot already.

It was certainly a bit of bad luck that Connington should have timed his visit to Inverlochtié so as to get there before the man who, little more than twenty-four hours earlier, would have denied any intention of going within twenty miles of the place. This vital fact was not admitted by many people when it assumed a peculiar significance. Yet it was true. But for the letters John received at Windermere he would have made for Oban, followed the Caledonian Canal to Inverness, and thence travelled south rapidly. According to that itinerary he would hardly yet have reached Oban, and might have passed through Fort William a couple of days later.

However, here he was, and resolutely determined to grapple with each difficulty as it arose. He wondered, for a moment, if Eileen knew anything which she had not told Betty, but dismissed that notion before it really took shape in his mind. If either of the girls had heard that Connington was coming they would have mentioned the fact. They knew nothing of him—had, as Betty implied, never heard his name—and his arrival was apparently more disconcerting to Alistair than to any other person.

John reached the post-office shortly before seven o'clock, timing his passing down a well-screened lane for an hour when the village was still occupied with the fag-end of the day's work, which dealt exclusively with farming and stock-raising. He passed into Macdonald's house through the kitchen. Spot, of course, being well in hand. And that was wise, too, because a pair of Highland terriers raised the welkin at sight of him and had to be shut off abruptly by the back door.

Macdonald, surprised by the racket, came and silenced them for a moment. He had just discovered who the caller was when the storm began again. The

would-be fighters were banished to the front shop and a cross-door bolted on them before the old man and the young could exchange a word of greeting.

The postmaster held out a welcoming hand, and his eyes glistened.

"Man," he said, "but it's a cure for sair e'en to hae sight o' ye!"

So, between them, Eileen and Macdonald contrived to make the wanderer's home-coming far more agreeable than he ever dreamed of. Then, to round off the surprises of a memorable day, his friend announced that "the young leddy hersel' was waitin' in the settin-room." There, sure enough, John found Eileen, who began a breathless explanation of something Betty and she had planned, but gave up the attempt when John took her in his arms and held her there.

"I owe you that hug, Eileen," he said joyously. "You remember, of course, that I warned you off when we parted on the corrie nearly seven years ago. I had to behave to-day in the station, so this is our first real meeting."

No longer moved to tears, but a flushed and embarrassed young woman, Eileen extricated herself from this lover-like embrace. Like the rest of her sex she wanted to make sure of her ground before taking an irrevocable step.

"Please do listen, John," she pleaded. "I have so much to say and so little time to say it in—that is, if I would avoid an open quarrel at Inverlochtié. You have read Betty's note?"

"Yes. I'm prepared for all sorts of ructions."

"But my father is here, and is sure to dine with us. It would be altogether too marked if Betty and I disappeared about nine o'clock, so I took a chance and

came out for the half-hour before dinner, that being a time when one is least likely to be missed."

John could not keep his hands off her. This was a good excuse to grasp her by the shoulders and look her squarely in the eyes.

"Of what are you frightened, Eileen?" he said tensely. "If there is going to be a break, why wait? If not, why have you brought me here?"

"Yes, dear, I know," she murmured, which was a woman's way of saying that she understood and agreed with both sides of the argument. "But you have not forgotten that I wrote you, too?"

"And you want my answer? You had it, dear, when you heard Macdonald unlatching the door. I would have flown from Mallaig to the other end of the earth rather than deceive you now. I have never known why I collapsed so badly in France, but have always thought it an altogether hopeless thing to question the finding of the court-martial. To-day all that is changed. The efforts of certain friends whom you will soon meet—some of them influential and extraordinarily well-informed—have brought to light circumstances which point to a very successful plot for my utter undoing. It's a pretty rotten sort of thing for a fellow to say of any other member of the family, but it looks as if Alistair had got this wretched man Connington to drug me so thoroughly that something was bound to go wrong. I don't suppose either of them cared which way the coin spun. I might have made a fool of myself and got pipped during the attack, or done as I did and refused to go over, thus rendering myself liable to be shot. 'Heads' or 'tails' I was for it. But the blessed penny fell on its edge, and stuck there, so Alistair's simple method of succession to the title and estates became a

dud. Now, don't let my enthusiasm throw any dust in *your* eyes. I have a long way to go yet before I can prove any part of what I am telling you. But at last I have reason to believe in myself, and it seems now that evil may bring forth good. It is nothing but evil which brings Alistair and Connington together in this peaceful glen, and the result must surely be good for you and me, since they can hardly do either of us much more harm."

It was a pleasant thing to say, while peering into the crystal-clear soul of the woman he loved. It was a pleasant thing for her to hear at the moment when, all her doubts resolved, she was ready to face the heaviest odds in her lover's behalf. But it was not quite a wise thing in its ultimate philosophy, because the potentialities for evil seem sometimes to be almost unlimited, and John Panton might yet have to add that bitter fact to his already ample stock of harsh experiences.

He had rather neglected his Shakespeare since that wonderful first Wednesday in June when a chance message from the void had torn Spot and him from a familiar environment which, with all its roughness and privations, offered him safety and a home. "King John" was a favourite play of his. Had his mind not been occupied with graver matters he might have remembered the famous lines:

*How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds
Make ill deeds done!*

He forgot all that when Eileen was whispering in his arms, though she was actually telling him that he ought to go straight back to Mallaig, because everyone in the village knew that she was in the post-office and would soon know that he was there, too!

CHAPTER XV

WHEREIN JOHN AND SPOT TAKE THE AIR

JOHN laughed at Eileen's fears.

"What does it matter now?" he cried. "Why should I run from this precious pair? It is their turn to try to escape. They will probably get in each other's way and quarrel. Then my chance may come. My notion is to walk forth boldly once you have gone to the house. Let everyone know I am here. If Macdonald is a fair sample of our glen folk, I shall find many more friends than enemies."

"Will you endeavour to see your father?"

"No. That is impossible. He sent me out of his life for ever. If that ban is to be withdrawn the first move lies with him."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Eileen, "why do people set up these stupid barriers of pride? Poor Uncle Hector is as kind-hearted a man as ever lived, and my father will go out of his way to do a good turn for the merest acquaintance, yet both are so bitter against you that they will not listen to a word in your favour."

"Have you tried them, dear heart?"

"Yes, time and again."

"So it comes back to this. You and I have our lives to live. We must be a law unto ourselves."

Timidly, yet confidently, she put her hands on his shoulders, drawing him closer until she could peer into his eyes and read the faintest shade of expression in his face, for the little room was low ceilinged and dim, its only window facing to the east. The last gleams of

the sun were reflected in sheets of gold by every westerly window of the great house on the braeside. The effect was beautiful, and of good portent as many would believe who hold by signs and tokens, but these two saw nothing of it.

"John," said Eileen. "I have forbidden you to talk of love . . . No, dear, I want you to listen. There is a time for all things, and the time for happiness is surely near for you and me. But we must be wise. You tell me there is a chance of your name being cleared. How utterly foolish it would be if any precipitate action on our part served once again to prejudice your case adversely. So we must separate now and not meet until you and your friends are able to establish your claim for a new trial, or whatever other means may be adopted to right a great wrong. I see now that Providence guided us in bringing you here to-day. That is not impious. You and I have not been fairly done by. Why should we not defend ourselves? And if I was mercifully prevented from hurrying off to meet you in London why should I not be thankful? Had I gone my action would have strengthened the hands of your adversaries. No matter how just your contention, they could still have pointed the finger of scorn at me. Betty, dear soul, saw that, and tried to dissuade me from a hurried decision. My way is clear now. I do not urge you to go or stay. You must act as you think best. But I cannot permit any cloud to rise between us in the after years. I am no puling girl that I should allow sentiment to sweep me off my feet. We have our future to consider, our joint future, dear—remember that. So I must stand fast here until you tell me that the last possible step has been taken to prove **your** innocence before all the world."

"Is this another farewell, Eileen?" he muttered.

"No. I am a woman who loves you, bidding you gird on your sword and return victorious. I want to see you fight. Last time you fled like one already vanquished. That must not happen again. I make no stipulation that you shall win. That would be pride, not love, and I have done with pride. But, even though defeated, you must not yield. Nor shall I, when the time comes."

Rather suddenly she drew away, passed around a small table, and stood near the door, a delightful and appealing vision in the half-darkness. She was dressed in white linen, save for a sports coat thrown over her shoulders. The keen air of the hills made its presence felt when the sun was off the glen, and Eileen was to the manner born.

"Don't come near me now, John," she said, almost pleadingly. "I—I might break down utterly. But I want to say something which may prove my steadfast purpose. The other night Alistair and I quarrelled openly, because I advocated your cause with your father and demanded that your letter should be answered truly. It was so answered, in a sense, but the arch-schemer managed to twist it into something unreasonable and almost insulting. Well, I told Alistair then, in Betty's presence, that I am not, nor ever have been, nor ever shall be his wife. I do not think it unbecoming that I should repeat those words now—for your sake."

Then she was gone. The man did not attempt to follow or detain her. Her very earnestness had taken his breath away. He literally did not grasp the true intent of that last strange avowal until she was already within the lodge gates, for his hungry gaze had accompanied her across the village green and so into the leafy fastness of the park. Then he understood, and

was so over-whelmed by the magic of the love which had burned so faithfully during the long years of storm and suffering that he sank into a chair.

He was recalled to his senses by a cold nose thrust into his hand and a soft tongue licking it. Spot, well aware that his duty on such an occasion was to remain a very quiet dog, had stretched himself under the table, and Eileen, after patting his huge head when he entered the room, had completely forgotten his presence.

John fondled his friend's neck and ears, and strove to recapture the confident mood of the afternoon. He had to admit that Eileen was right, though the admission implied the need of immediate action, and it has been seen that beyond taking the first great step by coming home to claim his legacy he had done little hitherto in his own behalf. He had tried to stop the marriage and had failed. After that nothing else mattered. Now, it would appear, his own position was the really vital thing. Of course, the outlook was not quite so hopeless as it had seemed when Frensham first met him on the Mall and stirred into activity some embers of the old fire by his story of a dying man's belief that Captain Panton had not been "treated fair" had been "doped," in fact. Why should that poor fellow, at a moment when the tide of life was ebbing fast, have wanted justice done to his commander? On what count? And why should he have used such a word as "doped"—so astonishingly apt when seen in the light of recent discoveries?

John realised now that he had been lax in not trying at once to find out something about that friendly lance-corporal, some of whose cronies must be living still. Dash it, he had just remembered the man's name—"Henry Mallings"—that was it. Three weeks after

the court-martial, while he was waiting in Liverpool for the fireman's job which would take him to Canada, he came across a list of the casualties sustained by his battalion in that very action. It was with hot envy rather than regret that he read the glorious page. He longed to be numbered with the dead. If a man's ghost was permitted to scan the columns of a newspaper surely it would be proud of the printed record that its mortal husk shared the same grave with such a gallant company!

The memory brought a stab of pain, but John thrust that aside resolutely. Was it too late to despatch a telegram? Furneaux might well like to hear of Lance-Corporal Malling, and endeavour to trace his close comrades among the survivors of the regiment.

Macdonald, with the innate courtesy of the Highlander, had not intruded on his guest after Eileen's departure. The old man knew that something was wrong. In that small and isolated community the affairs of the "Castle" and those of the humblest cottage were common property, and it was reported that Alistair Panton and his wife, having behaved strangely from the outset of their married life, had now passed from a sort of friendly pact of avoidance into open and bitter warfare. There are no secrets in a large household which, like Inverlochtié, is shut off from the outside world. And the village was practically part of the demesne. The instant Eileen sought rooms for "Master John" at the post-office and announced her intention of awaiting his arrival when she put in an appearance that evening, Macdonald guessed that the glen would have cause for gossip before long. And he was all for John Panton and Eileen, all against Alistair. Why this should be he could not explain.

"It was just an auld man's havers," he said afterwards, when striving to piece together the amazing events of that night and the next day.

It was too late, of course, to telegraph to London, but Macdonald undertook to despatch a "bit" message to Mallaig by cyclist before eight o'clock next morning. So John wrote sufficient to put Furneaux or one of his merry men on the right track if any information were to be obtained in that way. Then he ate a Highland supper, which can be as substantial a meal as any, and took Spot out for his first survey of a new land.

It was then about nine o'clock. The twilight was yet so luminous that the crests of the circling hills were etched against a vividly blue sky. The sun gilded the loftiest summits, but the heather and firs were black in the shadows, and the face of the loch was so smooth that it seemed not to be water at all but an inverted mirage of the wooded slopes and swelling moorland beyond.

Now for the first time John realised that there was not much to choose in scenic beauty between Loch Inver and Moose Lake, while they shared in common an extraordinary number of features. Indeed, if one could glance back a couple of hundred years in the one case and forward a mere generation in the other it was conceivable that, so far as the summer months went, at any rate, the resemblance might be quite remarkable. But John had other things to occupy his mind than the prospective development of Northern Alberta. He was racking his brain to determine what his first move should be, and he decided that he ought to await advice from London.

It was all very well to form bellicose schemes of clutching Connington by the throat and squeezing a

confession out of him. That might be good melodrama, but it was not sound common sense. Nor must he dream of obliging Betty Bridgnorth by laying into Alistair with a dog-whip or his bare fists. Any such reprisal, though enjoyable, would be most damaging to his own interests. So, as a matter of cold analysis, what good could he hope to accomplish by remaining at Inverlochtié? None whatsoever! That was the plain unpalatable truth. He had rushed there at Eileen's call, but, womanlike and quite wisely, once assured that he was her man for ever and a day, she elected to free him from the embarrassment of a too-speedy flight. Because she loved and was loved she had become clear-eyed as Minerva, daughter of Jupiter, the calmly inscrutable Pallas Athene of the Greeks.

Eileen had inferred that the appointment made that night for Ian's Leap would be kept by neither her nor Betty. Anyhow, John thought he would take chance and go there—it was as pleasant a stroll as any, and a meeting with Betty could be arranged next day. She, at least, was a free agent, and he wanted to consult her on a matter wholly apart from the present disturbance. He was not quite easy in his mind as to Lady Bridgnorth's bequest. Was she really so wealthy that she could dispose of such a large sum as a hundred thousand pounds for a sentimental reason? If Betty had suffered financial loss the thing must be put right.

Thus and so did John plan, passing through the tiny hamlet pipe in mouth, with Spot at his heels. A few men had gathered near an oak which dominated a small green. They did not pretend not to see him. Three stood attention and saluted; the others touched their caps. He raised his "deerstalker" with a flourish. It was significant that no one spoke. These good fel-

lows did not quite know how to act. Strange rumours were flying about. But it would be absurd to pretend that they had not recognised Master John. Why, some of the older dogs might have hailed him had they not been so thrilled by Spot's impudence in daring to walk so sedately along their street.

The ex-Service men, of course, little understood why their salute should bring the hot blood surging into John Panton's weather-stained face. For the first time in seven years he had received the tribute due to his former rank. He dared not return it—yet. But he halted while lifting his cap, and bade Spot to “’Tchun!” a bit of agreeable comedy which caused much favourable comment in Inverlochtié that night.

He could not help noticing indistinct faces peering above casement curtains, or frankly inquisitive ones framed in open doorways. Among others interested was Betty's Aberdonian policeman, whose name was Campbell. He needed no telling who the tall stranger was. He had seen Eileen enter and leave the post-office, and from what Alistair had told him, had formed conclusions which Alistair himself hardly suspected. Be that as it may, Campbell had doffed his uniform for what he called “plain cla'es.” In effect, he was wearing an old tweed jacket over his dark blue trousers.

He determined to keep an eye on John, but being a fair adept in the guiles of the poacher and salmon snatcher, did not make the mistake of appearing on the open road. It was easier and more discreet to leap the small hedge which shut off his garden from the borders of a burn running down to the lake in rear of his cottage, reach the bridge near the loch-side before John and the dog crossed it (they certainly would not be heading for Mallaig at that hour), and busy himself

in one of the boats moored there. Then he would ascertain which way they meant to go, while they could hardly imagine he was spying on them.

All this was honest enough on Campbell's part. He had been warned by the laird's nephew that the returned heir meant mischief—had, indeed, threatened an inoffensive cousin with bodily harm—so it was his duty as a policeman to size up the situation for himself. He had not taken Alistair quite seriously. Now that he had seen John Panton he was even less inclined to believe that any grave breach of the peace was imminent. On this occasion he had left truncheon and handcuffs at home, his automatic was locked in a cupboard, and he did not carry a stick, but by sheer force of habit he had thrust an electric torch into a pocket. In fact, his espionage was objectless, save that he guessed Eileen had met Panton already, and it might be useful if he learnt that some later assignation had been made and kept.

To Connington, of course, he had given no heed whatsoever. Some dozen men in the village held fishing rights in the loch, and occasional visitors came from Glasgow and even farther afield to cast a fly over some of the best water on the west coast for salmon and sea trout. That very day there were six strangers in Inverlochtié who might be classified under that head. Connington happened to be one of them. Campbell was in no way to blame for following the trail laid by Alistair.

So John and Spot did duly note a man assembling gear or examining a worn plank in a boat near the bridge. He was a stranger. He did not even look up as they passed.

Beyond that point a rough bridle-path meandered near the loch for miles. Mostly it ran close to the water's edge, but an occasional obstacle, like the bold

promontory now jutting forth some two hundred yards ahead, or the laird's boat-house and landing-stage, or a patch of swamp where a tiny brook broadened into a delta before reaching the lake, compelled a detour.

The wooded cliff in front was Ian's Leap. John knew that anyone waiting there among the trees would see him long before he gained the path on the landward side of it. No sign came from that quarter. No doubt Betty, after consultation with Eileen, had decided to come openly to Macdonald's place in the morning. He had not forgotten her fearless ways. She would always elect for daylight as against darkness, for candour rather than deceit. In any event, he intended to send her an early note; no matter what the binding necessity of the embargo on Eileen's visits it could not apply to Betty. So he refilled and lighted his pipe, bidding Spot rather emphatically to come to heel when a sudden dart into the gloom seemed to indicate pursuit of a rabbit or some other nocturnal prowler.

The two came to a momentary standstill about a quarter past nine. Campbell saw the flicker of the match and heard the order to the dog. He could just discern John's silhouette in the gap of the path among the trees and brushwood. The light was failing rapidly now in the hollows, though visibility was good on the lake and more than sufficient to reveal identity if two people met in any open space. So the policeman resolved to risk a surprise if his quarry moved on. The path was free to all honest folk at any hour of the twenty-four. He would walk swiftly ahead and possibly witness any meeting which took place at any point between the cliff and the boat-house, the latter being yet hidden, though only a hundred yards farther on.

It will be remembered that a straight, broad strip

of turf led through a belt of firs from the landing-place to the terraced garden in front of Inverlochtié House. This was crossed by the path, and on a clear July night in that northern latitude there would not be pitch darkness here even at midnight. In that exact locality Campbell counted on adding to the queer hotch-potch of information already simmering in his mind.

When the forces of evil conspire to bring about a tragedy they oft-times display an incomparable stagecraft in arranging its preliminaries. Who, for instance, would suspect Sir Reginald Lansing, good-natured profiteer that he was, of unconscious complicity in a crime which startled all Scotland, all England, and no small part of the greater world next day? Not he himself, certainly. And, perhaps, not even his charming and sharp-witted wife. At any rate, if she made any deduction of the sort it never passed her lips.

But the fact remains that when Lansing met Alistair in the billiards-room before dinner, the two being then alone, as Colonel Grant was closeted with Lord Oban upstairs, he precipitated a crisis.

"Panton," he said, "it's a dashed nuisance, but I've got to break up this pleasant party. Letters which reached me to-day call for my instant return to town, so we'll be leaving in the morning."

Alistair flushed. He had foreseen this catastrophe, for it was nothing less. He disregarded the "letters." A man of Lansing's importance in the Rubber market received the most urgent demands for his presence at board meetings and financial consultations every day of his life.

"We?" he managed to say with an air of surprise. "Mary isn't off, too?"

"Oh, yes—all the gang. She won't hear of my going

without her. She has some silly notion that if she isn't around I'll sleep in damp sheets or some rot of the kind. So we must chuck the moors this season and make the best of the east coast within easy reach of London. I'm thoroughly fed up. I hate clearing out just now, but it cannot be helped. Better luck next time!"

The man who was far more his host than Lord Oban needed no telling that there was one literally true statement in Lansing's rather laboured excuse. He was indeed "fed up." In actual fact he had read the Riot Act, or its matrimonial equivalent, to his wife at tea-time. "I've had enough of this," he stormed, "this" being the electricity in the social atmosphere created by Connington's visit, no less than his better half's admission that the outcast heir was even then at Mal-laig and bent on reaching Inverlochtié that evening.

"No one can be more sorry than myself," said Alis-tair, trying hard to control his temper. "Of course, I understand the claims of business, but I fear Oban will be upset. You know how it is with these old boys who have the territorial instinct strong in them. Uncle Hector thinks more of his stags and his grouse than of any company affairs, no matter how important."

Lansing laughed cheerfully. His usually smooth-mannered friend was so angry that he hardly measured the full import of what he was saying.

"Yes," he agreed. "I take off my hat to them in that respect. But you and I, bred in a more utilitarian school, realise that the stags and the grouse will not be there if we neglect the serious side of life. Anyhow, I have some pheasants on my place in Surrey, and we'll all have a bang at them in November. . . . I suppose I shall see Oban at dinner?"

"Almost certain. Grant is here, you know. Events

have occurred to-day which call for a sort of family council, though that would not have interfered with your comfort in the slightest degree."

"No, no—of course not. One can't help hearing things, and I hope matters will turn out all right in the end. It's a way they have. . . . Well, give me a hand if I make heavy weather of it while explaining to-morrow's flight. So long!"

Ultimately it was Lady Lansing's skill which extricated her husband from a dilemma. He was quite determined to break away, but did not want to hurt Lord Oban's feelings. As for Eileen and Betty Bridgnorth he was not concerned. "They're in it up to the neck already," he growled, "and my experience is that when women get mixed up in a row any man with a grain of sense in his head will cut and run."

So her ladyship bewailed her own sad lot, not her husband's to his lordship, and so bemused his surcharged brain with her own protestations that he sympathised with her. It was easy to see that in what he fondly believed to be his secret thoughts he was relieved by the prospective departure of his guests. Now that his son was within a stone's throw there was bound to be some unpleasantness, to put it mildly, and the Lansings might be drawn into it. Mary Lansing sensed this factor, and played on it. Reginald thanked Heaven once more for having given him a most capable wife. Eileen said something polite. Betty guffawed openly. Having no atom of tact in her own composition she appreciated it thoroughly in others.

For once in his life Alistair sat in sulky silence. Lansing was the one man living with whom he wanted to keep on the best of terms, and he felt that it would be many a long day before they met again at Inverloch-

tie. It was a bitter blow, because Lansing's friendliness often showed itself in financial tips of real value.

Nor did Colonel Grant, usually an interesting and chatty soldier of the Wolseley period, add to the gaiety of the feast. He fully appreciated the true cause of the Lansing's flight, and lost himself in dismal forebodings of the outcome of John's return home.

There was no "Bridge" that night. The party broke up at nine o'clock precisely. Colonel Grant's car had come for him; a main county road passed along his side of the loch, and the launch had been out nearly all day. Oban sought his own rooms, and, if he adhered to habit, would not be seen again that evening. The Lansings retired to "pack" promising to put in an appearance later for a farewell drink, and Alistair went out.

It would be about five minutes past nine when he passed through the garden and made for the boathouse. He reached it quickly, within five minutes, as the gradient favoured one of stout build. The two girls, wanting to talk in privacy, threw shawls over their shoulders and stood on the terrace close to the steps leading down to the garden. In no sense were they spying on Alistair's movements. They simply could not help seeing the direction he took, and, as was discovered subsequently, each thought he had made the landing-stage a rendezvous with some person unknown at or near the very hour they had chosen in the first instance to meet John.

They had excellent sight, and the light was still good up to the water's edge.

Though watching Alistair with some curiosity—his very definiteness being rather odd, seeing that the turfed avenue led only to the lake—their position commanded the curving drive from the house to the lodge.

As it happened, no sooner did Alistair vanish behind the boast-house, or what was the same thing from their point of view, turn on to the landing-stage itself, than they discovered Lord Oban crossing the park in the direction of the village. From being silent concerning the one man they broke into eager speech simultaneously in regard to the other.

"Oh, Betty, I believe your uncle is going to call on John!"

"Uncle Hector out at this hour! Well, well. Things are happening at Inverlochtiel!"

"I do hope John is in," continued Betty excitedly. "If he happens to have gone out old Macdonald will deny him thrice, with curses."

"Can't we follow and help?"

"Help what or whom? We would simply succeed in driving Oban home again. That old man is as proud as Lucifer. No. I would vastly prefer to round up Alistair and keep him from interfering. . . . Ah!"

"What was that?" cried Eileen in alarm. "Surely John cannot have misunderstood me? I told him our appointment was cancelled."

Both had caught the flash of a match in the darkness beneath Ian's Leap. Someone was there—someone, apparently, who waited, whiling away time by smoking. If it were John he and Alistair were little more than a hundred yards apart at the moment, and Lord Oban was nearing the village some four hundred yards away to the right.

It was a big enough stage, whether for setting or avoiding a tragedy. None could deny that the human material was there. The watchers could only hope that if some eyes proved a little blind and some ears a trifle deaf the opportunity for mischief might pass.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MURDER ON THE LANDING-STAGE

INTERESTED already, they were almost frightened now.

It was all very well to profess an airy belief that Alistair's delinquencies called for physical chastisement, but it became a most serious thing when two men who had every cause for hating each other might meet unexpectedly by night in a lonely place. Apart from the moral responsibility which must be shouldered by Alistair, to an extent he alone could measure, the degradation and suffering inflicted on John were nearly balanced by the avalanches of loss which had fallen on his cousin. The arch plotter saw a title, a fortune, an estate, and a wife being reft from his grasp. He was in a morbid condition, and therefore dangerous. John Panton had been hardened by living in the wilds and was in consequence doubly dangerous.

The girls knew this and dreaded the outcome of any immediate quarrel. Not daring to speak and undecided how to act, they merely stared and listened, hoping they would see or hear nothing, which would go to prove that a crisis had been averted. The mist was creeping inshore rather rapidly now, and the squat outlines of the boat-house were blurred already. Across the loch they heard Colonel Grant's car panting up a steep hill. They were just sufficiently aware of this to be sure of it, so to speak, when another car approached from the head of the loch and stopped in the village.

Such a belated arrival was unusual, but not unprecedented. Some of the visiting fishermen had probably brought cars; one of them must have returned from a jaunt to Mallaig.

For a few minutes, perhaps another five, nothing really startling happened; intermittent flashes of an electric torch came from the vicinity of the boat-house but these were rather reassuring than otherwise. Indeed, Lord Oban's tall, slender figure was merged in the group of elms near the lodge when the shrill tocsin of a police whistle rent the silence. There is a peculiar resonance in the sound which conveys alarm. People who have never before heard it seem to recognise the signal instantly, just as during the war pheasants in Norfolk, which certainly had no prior experience of bomb-dropping Zeppelins, detected the rattling flight of those ill-omened machines while they were yet far out at sea, and conveyed their excitement to all the furred and feathered population of the countryside.

Eileen and Betty were the first to take action. Telling a manservant who was replenishing the drawing-room fire that the call had come from the boat-house and that he was to bring help there at once, they sped down the hill.

Lord Oban noted it just as promptly, but he was much farther away—all of five hundred yards—as he had passed through the wicket at the lodge and was crossing the small green. Here three men, newly alighted from a tourist car, were talking to some of the loungers still grouped under the oak. They detached themselves promptly and approached his lordship. One was tall and strongly built, one not so tall but well proportioned, and the third quite diminutive but very alert in his movements. He seemed to take the lead.

"Are you Lord Oban?" he said, and the question sounded rather like a challenge.

"Yes," said his lordship.

"Two of us are detectives from Scotland Yard," went on the little man rapidly. "The big fellow is Sir Arthur Frensham, a friend and former brother officer of your son's. We are here to secure the arrest of a man named Connington. The local constable is not at home, and——"

Again that piercing whistle sent forth its appeal.

"That must be he!" snapped the speaker. "Where is the sound coming from?"

Too surprised to do other than answer directly, Lord Oban said it came apparently from the landing-stage.

"Is there a road?"

"Yes, a sort of a road."

"Can we get there in the car?"

"I think so."

"Will you guide us?"

"Willingly. I have not the least notion what is going on. I—well, it is idle to explain now why I happen to be in the village. . . . By the way, the man Connington you speak of went away from Inverlochtié this afternoon."

They were seated in the car by this time. Frensham, at the wheel, was bidden cross the bridge below the village. He had passed within a few yards of it when coming in from Mallaig.

"Are you sure of that?" the small man demanded abruptly.

"Of course I am. What possible motive could I have in misleading you, especially if, as you claim, you represent the London police?"

"It is not for me to analyse motives at this moment.

But I do want you to be certain of your facts. Connington has not gone back to Mallaig since he left there to-day. Could he have got away by some other road?"

"A most difficult moorland track, negotiable only on foot or by a pony."

"Where is your son staying?"

This brought up his lordship with a round turn.

"Really, Mr.——" he began haughtily.

"Furneaux. Detective-Inspector Furneaux, of the Criminal Investigation Department. My colleague is Detective-Sergeant Sheldon. . . . So you don't know where your boy is?"

"I did not say that my son's whereabouts are unknown to me," said Lord Oban.

"Then where the devil *is* he?" Furneaux demanded.

"At the post-office, I believe. But I must warn you, Mr. Furneaux——"

"That I am not being sufficiently polite, and that if I am not careful you may have to report me to the Commissioner. Go right ahead! He's used to the formula. He would wonder what was wrong if he didn't hear at least once a week that I had struck a long and torturing pin into some noble prop of the British Constitution like yourself. . . . *Sacre nom d'un pipe!* They're hard at it now, and we're miles away! Never mind your springs, Sir Arthur! Get us over this cursed road quickly, or we may be too late."

Furneaux's sudden explosion into wrath was caused by a third shrill blast on the whistle which, however, ceased instantly when two gunshots, fired in quick succession, not only sounded like miniature thunderclaps but woke into raucous activity all the bird life of the glen. The rooks, in particular, filled the air with their clamour. They silenced even Furneaux, while Lord

Oban was so agitated that he could neither speak nor think. Frensham had to switch on his head-lights, and the car was promptly attacked by a pair of frenzied owls. In the twinkling of an eye Inverlochtié had been roused from the sleep of ages.

Now, what had actually happened, subject to certain quite tragic limitations due to complete lack of knowledge on the part of some of the principal actors in a series of exciting events, was this:

John Panton, his pipe well alight, waited on the path a few indecisive seconds. Neither Betty nor Eileen had kept the tryst, which was hardly to be expected in the conditions. He was minded to turn back, but Spot was strangely agitated and growled, not once or twice but in a steady crescendo of excitement. Such a warning was not to be ignored. John stooped, adjusted the leash which he was carrying, and said in a low tone:

“Good dog! Seek him, then!”

Who, or what it was that had so excited an animal which never made a mistake when possible danger threatened, John could not guess. Possibly a deer had strayed down from the hills bent on foray among the village gardens. If that were so Spot must be held off by main force. Again, someone might be using the landing-stage, and a low-voiced order would make the dog understand that all this enthusiasm was misplaced. So on went the two, with Campbell treading warily in rear. He, of course, was utterly befogged. This time he had heard neither Spot’s eager whimpering nor Panton’s command. All he knew was that now or never he might ascertain the cause of this lakeside ramble by a man who trod the very land he would one day inherit as though inspired by some hidden if not sinister purpose.

John moved far more rapidly than the policeman

because Spot was tugging at the leash and seemed to have a most definite object in or near the boat-house. And, indeed, the dog's instinct was most dreadfully justified. Stretched on the actual landing-stage John found the body of a man lying in an ominously relaxed state. He seemed to know intuitively that it was Alistair. The plump limbs, the evening dress, the *verni* shoes which glistened faintly in the fast-fading light suggested not only a member of the house party at Inverlochtie but the lifelong enemy whom he had so hungered to meet and maul with his ten fingers. He could not be quite certain, because the limp form was turned partly on its face and breast, with arms sprawled out anyhow and legs crumpled up as though in a final contortion of agony. So, taking a double turn of Spot's leash round his left wrist, he knelt, struck a match, put a hand under the palsied head, and stared into the unseeing eyes of Alistair.

His persecutor was dead. Of that there could be no manner of doubt. John had seen death too often not to recognise it now. But there were indications in plenty of life having fled so recently that the exact interval since death took place was difficult to estimate. The limbs were still quite flexible, the eyes had hardly begun to glaze, and blood was oozing steadily from a peculiarly ghastly wound in the throat—a jagged, horrid sort of wound. And yet, though the poor, stricken flesh might almost quiver to the touch, the turbulent soul had already leaped the tremendous gulf between time and eternity.

A match does not last long, so John had to let go the listless head until he struck another. He had seen already that there was not much blood on the planks of

the landing-stage for the quite obvious reason that each was separated from the other by a space of at least a quarter of an inch, so the greater flow had poured into the lake. What John wanted to ascertain now was whether any weapon or other trace of the murderer could be discovered before he moved. The wound had never been self-inflicted; there was a thousand to one chance that it might have been the result of an accident. At any rate, it was well to make some sort of hasty examination without rising, so he held the second match well above his head and peered around within its small and feebly lighted periphery.

Then Spot growled again, quite viciously this time, every hair in his ruff stiffening into a bristle. John sprang upright and faced an oncoming figure, only to be dazzled by the gleam of a torch, while a gruff voice demanded:

"Noo, what's gae'n on here?"

John shaded his eyes as best he could.

"There has been murder done, I'm afraid," he replied. "But be careful how you advance, whoever you are. My dog will certainly pull you down if you come too near. And take that light off my face, confound you, or I'll throw both you and it into the loch!"

"Ye'd betther be tellt I'm the policeman frae the village, Mr. Panton," said the voice.

"All the more reason you shouldn't behave like a fool. Search the landing-stage! Look inside the boat-house! Mr. Alistair Panton has been killed, murdered, I believe. He must have been attacked unexpectedly by some scoundrel, because I stood within a hundred yards during the last few minutes, and I never heard a sound. My dog did, though. He dragged me here.

Haven't you a whistle? Well, blow it, you ass! We want lights and help, and they'll hear you at the house. There may be someone on the loch——"

He broke off suddenly. A thought, suggested by the words on his lips, flamed into conviction.

"Bring that torch here, where it is needed," he ordered, not unaware that Spot was tugging him in the direction of the boat-house. "Do you know how many craft should be under cover there for the night?"

Campbell, fumbling for his whistle and more than a little annoyed by the tone adopted by one whom he was still inclined to regard with suspicion, could not choose but obey. He knew his master when he met him, and, even though he might have to arrest John later, he accepted his leadership now. For all that, Aberdeen neither encourages nerves nor yields to panic. He had the whistle in his hand, but forbore from using it for a second. His keen eyes had detected something on the tarred planks between Alistair's body and the front of the boat-house, where a small verandah, facing the lake, gave some degree of shelter from rain.

"Here's drops o' bluid," he said. "Mebbe yer dog found they, an' that is why he's pullin' sae harrrd on the strap."

John looked too. The policeman's timely discovery went to prove that his first idea was correct—the murderer had escaped in a boat.

"These drops are off the weapon, not from my cousin's wound," he said. "Here are a launch, a dinghy, and a fishing-punt. Anything missing, do you think?"

"Not a thing. An' by that same token, I hae a sort o' suspencion that a bit boatie is ga'en frae the moorings ahent the brig."

"Very well. Stand fast, and blow that whistle for

all you're worth. Spot and I will soon find out if any boat is landing higher up."

Then Campbell tried to assert himself.

"I'm no sae sure——" he began.

"Oh, aren't you? But *I* am. You can do all the thinking you like a little later. At present I am in command, and don't you dare interfere."

John jumped the narrow deep-water inlet through which the boats reached cover. He had done it many a time before and knew exactly what sort of landing he would find in the scrub. Spot followed. Campbell heard the two scrambling over the rocks at the foot of Ian's Leap. They might be escaping under his very nose, though, to do him justice, he did not really think anything of the sort. Still he was irritated. His importance had been belittled. His own superintendent would not have ordered him to do this and that with such an air. At that moment he was feeling far from friendly disposed toward Lord Oban's son. Then he bethought himself, and blew the first loud summons on the whistle. In a few seconds he blew again.

To Campbell's dismay, the first to reach him were the two young ladies from the "Castle." Most certainly he did not want *them*. He hurried a few paces to meet them with the warning cry:

"Bide where ye are, leddies, I beg. Or, better still, hurry back an' send some o' they men."

"Oh, is that you, Campbell?" said Betty, vastly relieved. "I didn't recognise you for the moment. What has gone wrong?"

"Everything, miss. Bad worrk, I fear me. But will ye no' do as I ask, an' send help?"

"Help for what, man? Can't you say what has happened?"

"There's a deid man lyin' a bit back there, miss."

"A dead man? Not my cousin, Mr. Panton?"

"Ay. If ye *will* ha'e it."

"Mr. Alistair Panton?" said Eileen, faintly.

"Ay, mam."

"But what—who—has killed him?"

There was agony in the question, and terror too. The policeman was losing his temper, and caught nothing of this.

"Awa' wi' ye!" he shouted. "Ye stan' there not daein' a thing when I bid ye——"

He put the whistle to his lips and blew a third time, grasping Betty's arm none too gently when she would have run past him. Then two shots were fired from a point half-way down the open avenue, and the pellets rattled in a shower on the boat-house roof.

"Hi, there!" he roared. "What devil's business is that? Would ye be for murdherin' the young leddies, an' all?"

"That will be Dougal!" announced Betty calmly. "He will persist in carrying a gun at full cock, and I've often warned him as to the result if he trips. For Heaven's sake tell him not to reload. . . . Oh, my! You're not hit, Eileen, are you?"

Eileen had collapsed to her knees, but her voice was astonishingly strong.

"No," she said. "At least, I think not. I—I nearly fainted. But I'm all right again now, Betty. I am indeed."

"You *think* not! That means you are. . . . Let go my arm, you blithering idiot. . . . Tell me, Eileen, is it anything serious?"

"No, dear—really. I felt like toppling over, but something stung me sharply in the left shoulder, **high**

up. It can only be a scratch, and it did me good. Never mind me! Did Campbell say——”

“Campbell says nothing intelligible. However, here come some of the servants and Sir Reginald. They have plenty of torches. We shall know something definite soon now. Pull yourself together, old girl! Remember—not a word to anyone! Take my advice and don’t even look!”

Betty was absolutely right in her explanation of the shooting. They heard Lansing bid Dougal hand over his weapon.

“You may have done all sorts of mischief,” he said sternly. “In any event, you have alarmed the whole neighborhood. . . . Hallo, there! That you, Betty? And Eileen? Who’s that with you?”

“Campbell, our local policeman. He says Alistair has been killed.”

“Alistair killed! My God, how?”

“Campbell won’t say, nor will he let us go and find out.”

“It’s no’ a proper secht for anny wumman,” declared the constable indignantly. “You come, Sir Reginald, an’ you, Mr. Timms. The rest of ye fetch a stretcher, or something that’ll ho’d the body. Ye micht send a car tae Mallaig for a dochter an’ the inspector. . . . Ma certie! What’s this?”

The headlights of a large touring-car swung round the bend of Ian’s Leap, and four men alighted. Lord Oban was recognised instantly, but the others were strangers. A minor Babel of voices broke out, but the one terrible fact was quickly disentangled from a medley of excited questions and answers. A small man dashed toward the landing-stage, followed by another of the newcomers. They flashed torches on what they

found there, and the small man faced the oncoming crowd.

"Do I understand, there is a policeman here?" he said in a curiously authoritative way.

"Ay," said Campbell, aware that his functions were being usurped again, though for the life of him he could not prevent it.

"Well, you don't look it, but I'm not sib to the ways of Inverness-shire. Take care that not a soul is allowed on this pier until the men come to remove the body. Has anyone been here already?"

"On'y mesel' an' Mr. John Panton."

"Mr. John Panton! Where is he now?"

"He's ga'en off wi' his dog. He was kneelin' beside Mr. Alistair when I kem up."

"But you whistled twice before the shots were fired?"

"The shootin' had nowt te dae wi' 't, at a'. That was a bit accident, when ane o' they men fell. Mr. Alistair was deid long afore I whustled."

Lord Oban came forward. He was lamentably self-possessed. He held himself erect and there was no perceptible quaver in his voice.

"This gentleman is a detective-inspector from Scotland Yard," he said. "Are you telling him, Campbell, that my son was here alone with his cousin when you reached this place?"

"Ay milord," was the dour answer. "I ken fine what I'm tellin' him."

"Are you implying that my son may have been responsible for his cousin's death?"

"Nae, nae. Ye mauna be puttin' they worrds i' my mouth. I canna say what killed Mr. Alistair. It could harrdly ha' bin Mr. John. An' that's no fair till him,

eether. I'm boun' tae admit it was practilly eempossible for Mr. John—Gosh, milord, ye're makin' things verra deeficult for me! I can gie a straight tale, but no i' this gait."

"But where is my son now? You say he has gone off. In which direction did he go?"

"He had a notion the murdherer got awa' in a boat. Him an' the dog louped the bit dock an' left me here."

"Tellin' you to raise an alarm and stand fast till he came back?" broke in Furneaux sharply.

"Ay. That's the way on't."

"You probably had not met either him or his dog before?"

"That's so."

"It's a pity. I'll say nothing about Mr. Panton, but his dog has more brains in his left fore-paw than some people could produce if they were dissected. Why didn't you begin by telling us the two were in pursuit of the probably murderer? . . . Now, Campbell, just bite the end of your tongue and listen. You've made a bad start, and what little you know has been jumbled up by the gun accident and the sudden appearance of a lot of people you never expected to see. So let us forget everything except that Mr. Alistair Panton was found by Mr. John Panton lying here dead, with yourself on the scene very soon afterwards. How soon?"

"I never lost secht o' Mr. John. I followed him frae the village."

"Why?"

"If I tell ye why someone will jump doon ma throat."

"Impossible, or hardly possible. Why did you follow him?"

"Mr. Alistair tellt me this verra afternoon that his cousin had threatened him wi' violence."

"That was known in London a week ago. Well, carry on."

Campbell then put together a fairly collected and wholly accurate story. Even as he talked he realised that he must have witnessed the attack if John Panton had inflicted the wound which robbed Alistair of life. Moreover, as an old soldier, he could not help being aware that Alistair had been dead at least a few minutes before either John or he came up. He admitted this now, and was stirred to express his regret when Lord Oban reeled suddenly and would have fallen if Lansing had not been close enough to catch him.

"Its gay harrrd for a man tae pick an' choose his worrds when everybody is on the jump a' roond ye," he grumbled. "An', mind ye, I can on'y tell what I saw. The firrst I knew of annything bein' wrang was when I flashed ma lamp on Mr. John an' he said he'd throw me in they loch if I didn't tak' it off quick."

"Don't you think, Oban," said Lansing, with a note of real pity in his voice, "that you and the girls had better go up to the house? You can do no good here."

The older man recovered his poise rather remarkably.

"No," he said firmly. "I do not leave this place until my son returns or I am told he is to be found elsewhere. Cannot someone be sent to the Head o' the Loch? If he is looking for a boat which went in that direction he may be there now and actually in need of assistance."

"I'll go," volunteered Sheldon. "Perhaps you will detail one of your men to accompany me. I am not acquainted with the locality yet."

"Let me come," put in Betty. "You too, Eileen. If we step out we can be back at the house before the ambulance gets there."

Someone came running. It was John himself. The

group was standing in the full glare of the car's lamps, and he recognised nearly every person present. He was immensely surprised, of course, at seeing Frensham and the two detectives, but there was not a second to lose, and John in action was an altogether different man from John in the depths of disgrace and degradation.

"Hallo there, my friend the policeman!" he cried. "I was right about the boat. I would have grabbed the fellow in her if some fool hadn't fired a gun and scared him off into the mist. But my dog is on his track. Are the men here who run the launch? Let us get out into the middle of the loch. I've set guards all the way round as far as the Haugh. He can't break through if we step lively, and Spot will not lose him in a week . . . Dash it all, what's come over you all? Is poor Alistair lying there yet? . . . Mr. Furneaux, won't *you* take charge?"

"No time has been lost," said the detective. "A stretcher is coming from the house now. And we had to decide, you know, that *you* hadn't killed Alistair."

"I?"

"Yes. Either you or P. C. Campbell. Never mind that. Who *did* kill him? Connington?"

CHAPTER XVII

A NIGHT OF UNCERTAINTIES

JOHN shook his head.

"I've thought of Connington as the murderer," he said, "but for the life of me I could not make out any sort of detail as to the man in the boat. He was there and was keeping just within sight of the shore and that was all. The mist is rising rapidly, and soon we shall not be able to see a thing. . . . Oh, can't we get a move on?"

Seldom, if ever, even in the history of a remote Highland glen, where during many a lawless century the length and quality of a man's sword were his best warranty for life and estate, had such a gathering taken place on the shores of Loch Inver. Many a man had fallen there in violent death. Many a time had the clansmen met at night and in the mist to recover the bodies of friends or foes, but it was surely a rare thing that the people of the district should find themselves the mute spectators of a tragedy they did not understand and listen to strangers bandying names wholly unfamiliar in their ears.

John, of course, they knew, and it was a harrowing experience to hear the father trying heart-brokenly to establish the son's innocence when, if only for a moment, it seemed possible that Alistair might have fallen by his hand. But who was the perky little man who snapped so fearlessly at Campbell, the latter a newcomer in the district and none too popular? And who were these others who had brought a car by night where

car had never before been by day? And who was the supposed evil-doer now afloat on the loch in one of their boats—a sinister shadow whose personality had certainly been recognised by John Panton and the visitors from the south as a potential murderer? No wonder the little crowd of villagers which had collected with a magical speed stood silent and aloof, eyeing with awe the smaller group near the edge of the landing-stage and that huddled form in black lying so still within the arc of the car's headlights.

Eileen, too, and Betty, utterly crushed, remained somewhat apart. They knew not what to say and dared not interfere. Had they spoken the one to the other they would have burst into tears. Alistair Panton might have been as mischievous and vindictive as their fancy painted him, but it was a dreadful thing that the man they had seen a few minutes ago striding down the hill, one in whom the tide of life ran so strongly, should now be stretched dead almost at their feet, stricken so suddenly and terribly that he had not even uttered one despairing cry.

It was an extraordinary scene, a Rembrandt composition of lights and shadows, but utterly devoid of harmony in grouping or colour. The dust-covered car itself was rather monstrous. The people of the glen looked awkward. The two men in evening dress, over which they had thrown light covert coats, were equally out of the picture. The two girls, though utterly unconscious of their own bizarre attire, struck a strangely inappropriate note by their light-coloured silk dresses, smart shoes and stockings, and white shawls.

The dominating figure was undoubtedly John Panton, a virile, clear-voiced leader of men, who alone appeared to have some definite plan of action in his mind and

was chafing because no instant effort was being made to give it effect. The newcomers, evidently friends of his, could hardly be expected to take any definite steps. True, the little man had asserted himself and had mounted guard, so to speak, over Alistair's body. Yet even he could find no answer to that clarion appeal for a speedy patrol of the lake. Indeed, he was gazing rather fixedly at the approaching *cortège* of men from the house who were evidently carrying a litter. With them came Mary Lansing, her white dress and graceful figure identifying her at a considerable distance.

The sight of her broke the spell for one man at least.

"I'm sorry, Oban," said her husband, "but if you won't come with me I must hurry off and stop Mary. She may have been told what has happened, but I don't think she need see—this," and he looked toward the landing-stage.

Lansing's voice brought his friend back to the stark reality of the hour.

"Quite right," he said quietly. "I wish you would get the girls to go back with her and wait in the drawing-room until I join them later. Would you mind keeping them company? It would be wise, do you agree?"

"Certainly. And, bear up, old friend! Don't let this damnable thing upset you too much."

Lansing made off, but, for once in his masterful life, failed lamentably. Neither Eileen nor Betty would stir. As for his wife, she told him quite sharply that as the men seemed to have made a thorough mess of everything it was high time the women took charge.

"Céleste and the kiddies are all right," she added. "They heard the shooting, of course," but I made up some silly yarn about a 'lights out' signal, and they were quite satisfied. I had to see to them because you

rushed off without a word. Is Alistair really dead? Can nothing be done? Betty understands the treatment of wounds."

"He's dead as a door nail," growled Lansing.

Like most husbands he was never prepared for the feminine trick of evading the point actually under discussion by raising some other equally important issue which apparently must be dealt with at once to the exclusion of all else.

Lord Oban, meanwhile, had created a mild sensation.

Walking up to his son he laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I went to the village a few minutes ago to see you, John," he said. "It did not seem right that you should occupy a room at Macdonald's place when your own old quarters were available at home. Timms was making the necessary arrangements when the alarm was raised. No other explanations are possible now. Naturally, you have assumed control. Act as you think fit. Unfortunately, the steering-gear of the launch is dismantled, but some of the men can go out in the punt and dinghy, while there are plenty of boats at the Head o' the Loch. I must return to the house when Alistair's body is taken there. Shall I see you later?"

Luckily for John his father's measured speech gave him a few seconds in which to collect his thoughts. He seized a hand which he felt to be cold and trembling.

"Why, of course you will, dad," he said. "But *I* must go in the dinghy. I have a faithful friend out there whom I cannot desert."

And that was how father and son met after seven years!

The younger man could not trust himself to utter another word. Some miracle had been wrought in his behalf. He did not rack his bemused brain for its

cause. All that he knew was that the proud and forbidding father who had cast him off in the hour of his utmost need, and who showed no signs of yielding when the proceedings in the law courts offered a plausible excuse, had now given way on all counts. He could not begin to guess what had happened. But his mind was filled with a great joy; a world which had been dun and dreary for many a day was now brightening into an entrancing prospect of happiness.

Yet his surroundings contrasted strangely with his mood. As he raced along the landing-stage the planks creaked and bent under his weight, and Alistair's body moved slightly, seeming to sink even a little lower into eternal night, while John himself, within a few seconds, was utterly swallowed up by the mist. During a brief space the splash of the oars could be heard. Then there was silence. He might have gone from Inverlochtié as suddenly as he came.

Furneaux, of course, had missed no shred of this dramatic interlude. As might be expected, he was sympathetic, and this was a case in which even the strict discipline of the C.I.D. might permit the heart to overrule the brain.

"Your son literally had not a moment to spare, Lord Oban," he said. "Perhaps I can make things a trifle clearer. He brought with him from Canada an extraordinarily intelligent dog which, as you may have heard, is now pursuing the man whom some of us suspect of being your nephew's murderer. The dog will recognise or obey no one but his master, and he may be in difficulties if, as I expect, the fugitive has crossed the loch. That is why Mr. Panton could not wait another second. Have no fear! Both master and dog will come back safe and sound. And now, will you pardon me if I make

a suggestion? Sir Arthur Frensham, my colleague Mr. Sheldon, and I myself are strangers in a strange land. Within a couple of hours we shall be wanting some place to lay our heads, as we have been travelling continuously by rail and road since late last evening. Will you ask someone to provide for our needs? And I advise you to get those ladies up to the house. They will go if you bid them. I see your friend's embassy has not been successful. I'll come to you after certain formalities have been complied with."

The old laird's heart warmed suddenly to this queer little man with a provocative tongue, which nevertheless had an amazing flair for saying the right thing.

"You three gentlemen will be my guests, of course," he said courteously. "Inverlochtié can sleep a house party of thirty—has often done so. When my unfortunate nephew's body is removed, Sir Arthur will be able to drive his car straight up the avenue and into the park. One of the gardeners will show him the way to the garage. Or I can send a chauffeur. Will *you* tell him this, or shall I?"

"You, milord," murmured Furneaux in an undertone. "I have work to do here, and I must persuade our local policeman that while I seemed at first to treat him as a booby I really regard him as a most intelligent person. Send the stretcher-bearers forward. Every other person must go. On no account should anyone cross the stage or enter the boat-house."

Lord Oban was only too glad to find a purpose in life. He busied himself so efficiently that the crowd began to break up at once.

Campbell glowered at Furneaux like a stubborn Highland stot when the detective crooked a finger at him. But he came, and could hardly believe his ears when

he was swept forthwith into a confidential chat.

"It is you, Campbell, who are really in power here," came Furneaux's surprising admission. "I had to interfere for a few minutes or the affair might have developed an awkward twist which would cause no end of trouble. By mere chance I happen to be acquainted with some of its features not known to anyone in Inverlochtie, not even Lord Oban himself, or any other member of the family. I'll tell you all about that in a few minutes. At present we have to act. You understand, of course, that we men from the 'Yard' have no official status in Inverness? We rushed north with a warrant for the arrest of a notorious trafficker in drugs, a man named Ferdinand Connington, who, in all probability, is now trying to hide himself somewhere on the other side of the loch. We have permission from your county authorities to seize this fellow, with the assistance of the police, and I have in my pocket a letter addressed to you from the inspector at Mallaig bidding you act with us. Here it is. . . . No, don't read it now. Plenty of time for that later. Obviously, it has no bearing on the death of Mr. Alistair Panton. That is *your* business. To-morrow you will have the procurator-fiscal on the spot; and he will look to you for every scrap of really reliable information. So anything I have to say is merely by way of a tip from one old hand to another. I suggest, therefore, that you examine Mr. Panton's clothing and take possession of all documents, money, etc., you find on his person. I'll help you to make an inventory, if you like. Then, while Mr. Sheldon goes with the stretcher to the house and sees to the body being locked in a room of which he will take the key, handing it over to you, you and I will make a thorough search of the immediate surroundings, so far as such

a thing may be possible by night. You ought to establish some sort of guard here to prevent intrusion until the morning. I am sure that at your request Lord Oban will detail men from the house and estate to keep watch in pairs. You might write a brief report of the murder, if it really *is* a murder, and send it to your district officer at Mallaig. Don't go yourself, but get a trustworthy man to ride in on a bicycle, paying him, if necessary. Once those preliminaries are out of the way, you and I must have a long talk, and I promise you the procurator-fiscal will open his eyes very wide to-morrow. But the story must come from you. Mr. Sheldon and I will be at hand to corroborate you if necessary. Now, have you grasped all that?"

P. C. Campbell had done more than grasp it. He was really a rather shrewd fellow, and he saw quite clearly that he was being offered a celebrity not often attained by an ordinary constable stationed in a remote rural district of Scotland. He saw, too, that his every move was being indicated, while any display of initiative on his part would not be welcomed.

"Ay," he said, with a grudging admiration. "Ye've put the procedure in a case like this varra straight an' proper, Mr. Furneaux. Shall I bid they men tae stan' fast till we search the corp?"

"Yes. You take the lead in everything. It's your job. If you're in doubt, and would like my advice, I'll give it willingly."

Thus far, at any rate, Furneaux had succeeded in setting the policeman's feet on the right path. In later days none knew better than Campbell himself that he might have blundered badly if that odd little man from the Criminal Investigation Department had not been ever by his side. What he did not nor ever will know

is the extraordinary restraint displayed by Furneaux. Never had the humorist of the "Yard" found a better subject for the play of his nimble wit, yet the slightest suspicion of such a thing would have converted his new friend and ally into a bitter and uncompromising opponent. But he had taken the measure of the man at a glance, and regretted now even that initial bit of sarcasm when he lashed out in defence of John Panton. It could not be helped, however. It would have been an outrage if the son were held up to general obloquy as a potential murderer in the very moment he met his father once again after a long and most lamentable separation. So Campbell had to be gagged and bitted. Now he was being led gently to the pleasant pastures of professional notoriety and probable promotion. That was all right. He was amenable to both methods. But he must not be joked with, even difficultly.

Not, indeed, that there was any call for Furneaux's peculiar qualities during the next few minutes. Alistair's death was so recent that the scrutiny and cataloguing of his personal belongings were robbed of certain revolting features attached to these first duties of the police in all cases of suspected crime, no matter how long the victim's body may have remained unburied. Still, it is a disagreeable task at the best.

The yield, however, was noteworthy in some respects. The dead man carried a packet of ten five-pound notes, done up with an elastic band. This sum was additional to a few pound notes and silver and copper coins, stuffed into an ordinary purse, and was significant only by reason of the locality, where a fairly large sum of money could hardly ever be in instant demand. Then, in the right-hand pocket of his dinner jacket lay a small but thoroughly effective automatic pistol—an even more

remarkable possession than the bundle of notes in a place like Inverlochtié.

Certain documents, too, were interesting. One signed "John Bridgnorth Panton" could only be the famous letter on which Alistair depended for proof of his cousin's enmity. A second, lacking date, address, or signature other than a hieroglyph which might represent the initials "F. C.," intimated the writer's regret that "you," presumably Alistair, should have declined to "come south."

An illuminative sentence which caught Furneaux's eye ran:

"Sooner or later you will have to face the music. Why not now?"

He did not attempt, however, to read either letter carefully. He was preparing the list while Campbell enumerated the various articles. This done, the body was lifted into the stretcher and carried up the hill. In the old days such a *cortège* would have been lighted by flaring torches. Now the steady beams of electric lamps were more effective though less picturesque. Nevertheless, the passing of the small procession had a solemnity of its own. The three women, watching it from the terrace, yielded to the strain, and sought refuge in the drawing-room. Lord Oban and Sir Reginald went to the west door and there awaited the arrival of Alistair's body.

While they were descending the stairs, Lansing, prompted thereto by his wife, offered to postpone their departure.

"I don't like pretence of any sort," he explained, "so I want to tell you now that I have no really urgent call to town. We were going because we felt we were in the way. Everything seemed to point to a period

of continued family jars, and at such a time guests can become a positive nuisance. Of course, poor Alistair's death has changed all that. Mary and I and the kiddies will go or stay, just as you may decide. That is, I think we ought to clear out, if only as far as Mallaig, but if our presence here is likely to be of any service to you and the two girls we'll stop as long as you like."

"I am sure the girls will value Mary's presence," said the older man. "As for myself, the advice of an experienced and wholly disinterested man of the world like you may prove most helpful during the next few days. If it is not too much to ask that you should share my worries I hope you will not think of leaving the house."

"That settles it. We remain. One word more—for my own guidance. You spoke to your son a few minutes since as though your attitude towards him had changed completely. If that is your decision I am heartily glad of it."

"Yes. I have heard things to-day which seem to prove that he has been treated most unjustly by all of us. I, unhappily, am the chief offender. I cannot speak positively yet. I can only say that my confidence in Alistair was shaken. To-morrow——"

Lansing patted his friend's shoulder encouragingly.

"To-morrow, or next year, or never—it is matterless," he said. "I only want to know what line to take. Mary has an almost uncanny insight into men's motives, and, although she met John to-day for the first time, she decided instantly to champion him as against Alistair. What it's all about I don't know, and don't want to know unless you wish to tell me. But I hate opposing my wife in these matters, because I am invariably wrong."

Lord Oban wrung his friend's hand in silence. A car had dashed up the drive, and Colonel Grant's voice

was raised in loud inquiry, to be even more quickly hushed when he heard the nature of the burthen even then within a few paces of the main entrance.

Later, much later, his presence was explained. He and some of his servants had heard the distant gunshots. A gillie despatched on a bicycle to the head of the loch to make inquiries had come back thoroughly scared. In the first instance, as he was traversing a level strip of the road close to the water's edge, a man loomed through the mist, hurried furtively across the highway, and disappeared up a little-used lane leading to some rocky pastures at the foot of the moor. The messenger would not have given a second thought to the folly of a stranger in taking such a track at night were it not that the shooting had come from the north side of the loch, while this mysterious person must have crossed soon afterwards in a boat.

The gillie believed that he himself had neither been seen nor heard, as at the moment he was riding on the turf against a background of firs; so he alighted noiselessly and listened, thinking he might determine the seeming fugitive's direction and learn whether a boat was coming in pursuit. Failing the latter, he meant to remount, stop at the mouth of the lane, and shout an inquiry as to why the shots had been fired. If the unknown were an honest man he would reply. If he kept silent, something definite, at least, as to his whereabouts could be communicated to anyone searching for him.

Then the watcher saw a ghostly object which startled him so greatly that the real purport of his mission fled from his mind.

A gaunt, powerfully built animal, which the gillie described as a wolf, crept up from the loch, halted in the

middle of the road, glared at him, and sped into the lane.

Now, the only four-footed wolves in Scotland are buried there, unless in the rare case of a menagerie travelling through the country, and it happened that this particular gillie was a raw youth who had never gone farther afield than Inverness to the east and Oban to the south-west. But, for all that, he knew a good deal about the ways of wild nature. He would have felt no alarm had a stag royal peered at him over a hedge, while the sight of a stray dog late at night would have led him to give close heed to its type and markings in case a sheep were found dead next day.

It was, therefore, a strange thing that he should have been frightened so thoroughly that he pelted back to Glen Inver with no news at all save a cock-and-bull story which excited Colonel Grant's wrath and the derision of the other servants. Indeed, when he spoke of the creature's fiery eyes and stealthy movements he got laughed at, lost his temper, and was promptly discharged by his irate employer. It may be said at once, however, that this unfortunate side issue was put right next day.

The Colonel ordered his car, got out at the junction of the main road with the lane, and was distinctly shaken in his belief that the gillie was a credulous fool when he found the footmarks of some animal on the surface of the road. They were still wet, so were easily discernible by lamp-light, and their presence lent some sort of credence to the boy's statement, though the full-blooded addition thereto of a stalking wolf was far too rich yet for the Colonel's digestion.

His car could not possibly negotiate the steep lane, which, he knew, ended at a broken-down gate some two hundred yards up the brae; he decided, therefore,

to go right through to Inverlochtie, and, if necessary, to the big house itself.

At no great distance he met the first of the patrols established by John from among the men hurrying from the village, but was given such a confused and inaccurate (as he believed) account of events on the opposite shore—from which he had come barely twenty minutes earlier—that he abandoned the idea of getting any reliable information short of Lord Oban's residence.

Not wishing to add to the prevalent excitement he said not a word to the volunteer sentry as to the "wolf" following a fugitive. That was a pity. The car had not rounded the head of the loch before John was ashore at that very point and was told of the colonel's passing, with the seemingly reasonable deduction that he had no information to give.

Thus does fate ply her shuttle when she weaves a net destined to entangle the feet of unwary humanity. Even when Grant was standing with his friends on the steps of Inverlochtie House he deemed it no moment to intrude on them the gillie's queer tale while Alistair Panton's body was being carried into the hall and up the great stairs. He hardly knew yet what had actually happened. His mind was in a whirl. The murder of Alistair, the return of John Panton, the strangely inopportune visit of Connington, the steady refusal of his daughter to listen to what he and Lord Oban called "reason"—these things were horribly unsettling to one who had "dug in" on his small estate for the remainder of his life.

So, like many another man in similar circumstances, he chose to say nothing until, as he put it, things had shaken down a bit. By that time it was nearly midnight!

CHAPTER XVIII

VEILED BY THE MIST

JOHN had set himself no easy task when he drove the dinghy out into the mist. He knew quite well that in the absence of a compass the tendency to row in a circle was quite irresistible if the distance to be covered was of any considerable extent. There was no vestige of a breeze, or its direction would have helped. He trusted to luck, therefore, that a steady pull would bring him across the half-mile width of the loch at that part. Once he reached the opposite shore he would probably be able to recognise some outstanding feature, such as a small island, or tiny bay, or the bold promontory known as the Haugh, which corresponded with Ian's Leap on the north side. Then he would drift quietly close inshore, keeping an alert ear for the presence of another craft.

Though there was no scrap of actual evidence on which to base the belief, he was convinced that the fugitive was his ex-company-sergeant major. Spot's behaviour was the determining factor. The dog remembered Connington. He had wanted to attack him in the Gamma-Delta Club. That very day he had discovered him in the station at Mallaig. Only a few minutes ago he had sensed his recent presence on the landing-stage. When he took to the water he knew perfectly well whom he was pursuing. John placed unquestioning faith in Spot, whose marvelous instinct

either for direction when lost or for the nearness of an unseen enemy had saved his life twenty times round about Moose Lake. Why should such trust be weakened in the neighbourhood of Loch Inver?

He reasoned that Connington would make for the head of the loch. Any other direction was almost unthinkable. Steep hills, clad with impassable heather where they did not rise in sheer precipices, offered a barrier north, east, and south which even a man born and bred in that part of Inverness-shire would not dare to tackle in the dark, whereas this southerner had all the disadvantages of being a total stranger. Nevertheless, he had been a soldier, and a well-trained one. His faculties might be atrophied by drugs and a vicious existence since he was demobilized, but he would certainly retain some of his military lore, and one glance at the *terrain* by daylight must have warned him that the road to Mallaig was the only practicable one. Therefore, he would head that way.

Rather luckily, John managed to strike the Haugh. At the first glimpse of it over his shoulder he rested on his oars and listened intently. Hardly a sound was to be heard. The water was so placid that not a tiny wavelet lapped the nearest rocks. A few birds still nestled uneasily among the trees, and a fish leaped occasionally with a startingly loud splash; to experienced ears these noises of the night were but a part of the greater silence.

Then a motor-car snorted into life and raced along the shore road with a din that was intolerable by contrast. John knew exactly what had happened. Colonel Grant's household had been roused by the shooting, and the colonel himself had come out to investigate, because John was well aware that Eileen's father had

gone home about nine o'clock. It is regrettable, but true, that if he were ever destined to marry Eileen he used language then about his prospective father-in-law which may not be repeated. The old gentleman was tearing along the very road which the fugitive must be aiming for, or even traversing already. What effect would the passing of this noisy Juggernaut have on Connington's frayed nerves? He would surely deduce a general alarm and organised pursuit. He might even be driven back on to the lake, and endeavour to work his way eastward for fully five miles, taking advantage of the dawn to find cover among the hills. If he were really bent on flight that would be his best course, though the pressing problem of food would soon have to be solved. But what would become of Spot? The dog could not swim about all night. Very few dogs could cross Loch Inver, let alone follow a boat for many hours.

Colonel Grant's car halted, and again John interpreted events correctly. The first of the six or seven villagers whom he had enlisted as sentries had been met and was now being questioned. After a brief interval the car went on again. He pulled in, drew the dinghy well up on a sloping beach, and sought out the man stationed at the Haugh, one Matt Fletcher, a farmer known to him all his life.

As he anticipated, Fletcher had seen no one except the colonel.

"I was just goin' back tae connect wi' Will Scott," said Fletcher. "He's the best pairt o' twa hunner yards awa', but he'll let oot a bit whistle if he sees this lad Connington, because he had an 'ee for him this afternoon, when he was loungin' aroond by Minter's shop. Minter's the new grocer, ye ken, captain?"

The once familiar title struck a new note in John's ears. Not so long ago he would have resented it fiercely. Now there was some fair prospect of his rank being restored, though, indeed, it was idle to pretend that Alistair's death had not complicated matters greatly.

"Colonel Grant told you nothing, I suppose," he said quietly.

"Not a thing, sir. He's on the hunt for news hisself. He wanted badly tae know wha fired they shots, an' I couldna tell him."

"I understand that Dougal fell with a gun in his hands, and both barrels went off accidentally."

"Ay. Is that the way on't? Weel, weel! Dougal's ma brither-in-law, so I ken fine he's a fule."

The deduction might be a *non sequitur*; again, it might not. John left it at that.

"Right you are, Fletcher," he said. "Pick up Scott and come back. I'm going round the head o' the loch in the dinghy. Unless we have some luck within another hour we must abandon the search till the morning. You'll stand fast until all our scouts are called in?"

"Ay, that I will. I suppose, sir, there's nae doot Mr. Alistair's deid."

"He died so quickly that he never uttered a cry. I cannot tell you yet how he was killed. It was a terrible wound in the throat—the sort of thing usually caused by a jagged piece of shell."

"The Lord save us!" exclaimed Fletcher. "We had enough of that i' France without bringin' it tae Inverlochtie."

Then John recalled that Fletcher was one of those who had gone from the glen at the first call to arms. Time was when he himself had been inordinately proud of the fact that the recruiting crusade of the early part

of the war was unknown in Scotland—it had never been needed. He had almost forgotten that glorious tribute to his country's indomitable spirit!

It was nearly midnight when the little band of watchers gathered in the village street. Their vigil had yielded not the tiniest scrap of information as to the whereabouts of the suspected murderer. But many other things had been determined. Connington had brought no luggage of any description, but the grocer, at Alistair Panton's request, had promised to reserve a room for the stranger should it be needed late that evening. The missing boat, readily identified as the property of a local fisherman, was found beached not far from Colonel Grant's house. A boat-hook had gone; presumably it would be picked up when daylight rendered a thorough scrutiny of the lochside practicable.

No one paid any real attention to the absence of the boat-hook until Furneaux heard of it.

"Ah!" he chortled, "that's the missing link! The very thing, of course. No wonder poor Panton's head was nearly torn off his shoulders. What an implement!"

He said no more at the moment. He had just completed a long telegram to Scotland Yard, which would be despatched to Mallaig early next day, and the sight of it caused John to redraft the message he had already written to Leslie. When the two emerged from the post-office John was carrying a bag.

"Where are you and the others staying, Mr. Furneaux?" John inquired.

"For the time being we are guests of your noble father," said the detective languidly.

"Well, cheer up! The old man may have his faults, but he will do you well. Have your traps gone on?"

"Not yet. I must wait here till Frensham and

Sheldon return from Mallaig. I thought it best that they should go in and supplement P. C. Campbell's report, or the inspector would surely think the poor man had gone crazy with the heat. They should be here any minute now. Frensham is a noble fellow. We came through from Stirling to-day, yet he thought nothing of tackling the extra twenty miles to-night. He certainly has grit."

"Are you too tired to walk down to the head o' the loch?"

"What to do? Haven't you just come from there?"

"I want to give a whistle or two. If Spot is within hearing he will come."

"But why did you send him in pursuit in the first instance if you recall him now?"

"I knew you would say that, yet I hate the thought of going indoors without him."

"Well, please yourself. I shall be sorry to think that our only effective scout should be taken off the trail. Besides, what harm will a night in the open do him?"

"None. I wouldn't worry if I were with him. I'm just a bit rattled, I suppose, by the extraordinary sequence of events since Spot and I strolled out from Macdonald's place shortly before nine o'clock. . . . Is this your car?"

"I hope so. I'm most confoundedly tired. I didn't sleep in the train, and I find motoring rather a bore. When I retire from the service I'll buy a donkey and cart, and jog along country lanes for the remainder of my existence at four miles per."

"I have not had a chance of asking you sooner. How on earth do you come to be here at all?"

"Firstly, because I pride myself on a fine sense of

what the higher criticism calls 'the dramatic unities.' Life is a tragedy, and all the indications pointed to a strong fifth act being played here at Inverlochtie. In the second place, your friend Leslie was greatly concerned, and persuaded the Commissioner to free Sheldon and me for a few days' extra-departmental work in the north. Thirdly, Sir Arthur Frensham had a friend in Stirling who would surely lend him a first-rate car. Lastly, I was particularly anxious to stop you from being a fool, and I think I was only just in time."

Furneaux stepped into the middle of the road and extended his arms. The car which John had heard in the distance drew up. In a few seconds they were speeding through the park. Spot was not forgotten. It was with a wrench that his master resolved to leave him to his own devices until daylight.

Frensham was driving, with Sheldon by his side, so John could only exchange a word of greeting with his very staunch friend. But Frensham did manage to throw over his shoulder a somewhat remarkable comment:

"So the old man turned up trumps after all, Johnnie?"

"Yes, thank goodness!" said Panton.

"I thought he would. Leslie thought so, too. A wise bird—Leslie."

John could not fathom the depth of this remark. It puzzled him, but slipped his mind at the moment in the emotion of alighting once more at the steps of his old home and gazing through the open doorway into the familiar vista of the great entrance hall, with its noble staircase rising at the back.

The butler was ready for him. It was he who had

flung wide the door and now hurried to the side of the car.

"Welcome back to Inverlochtie, Master John," he said with a dignified bow. "His lordship told me you were expected, so your own room is ready. If Sir Arthur Frensham, Mr. Furneaux, and Mr. Sheldon will point out their respective portmanteaux I will see that they are placed in their apartments. Supper is laid in the dining-room. His lordship is coming now to escort you there."

"Splendid!" cackled Furneaux. "Do tell me your name."

"Timms, sir."

"Better and better. I'm Furneaux. To-morrow, Timms, you and I will impart secrets to each other concerning the superior clarets. Meanwhile, I can eat. Is this the season for venison pasties?"

"They are seldom made nowadays, sir."

"Well, well. A slice of boar's head, then? Or a roasted cygnet?"

"You will find a roast duck far more digestible, sir. In fact, at this time of night I would suggest a plate of soup, followed by a little chicken and ham."

Be he ever so weary Furneaux might be trusted to start some tomfoolery of that sort when it was most needed.

John had crossed the hall to meet his father. Higher up, on the stairs, stood Colonel Grant, toying nervously with his moustache. It was a difficult moment, yet it passed off quite pleasantly, because Lord Oban affected to regard his son's homecoming as a quite commonplace sequel to their earlier meeting.

"I knew you would be detained, dear boy," he said, advancing with outstretched hand. "I have persuaded

Grant to stay the night. Lansing, Sir Reginald Lansing, whom you may not have met, is making himself useful carving things in the dining-room. We simply compelled the ladies to retire. They are naturally quite upset, but I hope they will sleep, because we all have a big day before us to-morrow."

John was literally tongue-tied, though a queer conceit danced in his brain that Frensham's curious reference to David Leslie must have some bearing on his father's attitude. Luckily, he was spared a further ordeal, Colonel Grant being far more ill at ease than he was. The two shook hands with the self-conscious air of true Britons who, not knowing what to say, say nothing. The introductions which followed served to relieve the situation. As they all moved toward the dining-room, which was on the ground floor, a buzz of talk broke out with regard to the non-success of the hunt for Connington.

It was Colonel Grant's unhappy lot to draw general attention to himself when they were seated at table, and Lansing was serving a much needed meal to at least three hungry men.

"I wonder," he said, "if there was anything in the story one of my men told about half-past nine? I thought he was a perfect fool, and made no secret of my opinion, whereupon he became impertinent and I discharged him. By gad, perhaps *I* was in the wrong and not *he!*"

Thereupon he gave a full and true account of the Glen Inver gillie's adventure with a strange man and a wolf, uncanny apparitions which came ashore from the mist-covered lake and vanished silently into a lane leading nowhere except to the hills.

Now John knew by this time that the missing boat

had been discovered in the very locality described; he alone realised the exact measure of Grant's pig-headedness and its effect on the search for Connington. He held his tongue, but laughed harshly. It was simply impossible to keep altogether quiet. The grim humour of the situation was too much for him. Everything said or done since he crossed the threshold of Inverlochtié seemed to conspire against ordered speech on his part.

But Furneaux, now slightly revived—he had found some 1870 Chambertin on the table—struck in instantly.

"Are you laughing at or with the gillie?" he inquired.

"Did I laugh?" said John. "I didn't mean to. I'm afraid my nerves are a trifle on edge. Everything has been contrary to-night. We are not men but puppets, dangling at the ends of strings manipulated by a callous and altogether inhuman power."

"Of course Colonel Grant's messenger saw Connington and Spot?"

"Yes. Had Matt Fletcher been told we might have Spot with us now and Connington in safe keeping for the night."

"Dash it all," broke in Grant heatedly. "Angus vowed the creature was a wolf."

"Angus was not far wrong," said John. "My dog is a Canadian husky. Undoubtedly he has a fair share of the wolf's blood in him. Sometimes the wild strain is most marked. In Spot's case it is confined altogether to his appearance and an almost phenomenal keenness of scent and vision. But when his rather magnificent coat is soaked with water he resembles a wolf far more than a chow, which I suppose, makes up the greater part of his doggy side."

It was generous of John to enter into that explana-

tion, which gave time for the flush of annoyance to fade from Colonel Grant's face. The older man, however, was not minded to spare himself.

"It was I, then, and not my gillie, who behaved foolishly," he cried with the honest bitterness of one who knew that an assumption of superior knowledge at an unfortunate moment had wrecked John's well-laid plan for the capture of a malefactor.

Sheldon struck in then. He was the least talkative man who ever shared in the secrets of Scotland Yard, but it was well known among his intimates that he believed implicitly in the existence of an active and most potent evil force in the human cosmos. This discussion stirred him out of his usual reticence.

"No," he said earnestly. "Please do not think that, sir. Mr. Panton, perhaps unconsciously, hit on the right solution. 'Puppets' he called us. What else are we? And how can we be sure that at certain moments in our lives the influences which make for good, and they generally predominate, do not give place to those which make for evil?"

"What beats me," said Frensham, "is why Connington should want to kill Alistair Panton, who, by the way, is something more than a mere name to me, because, although I never met him, I wrote to him after things happened in France. I, for one, never believed John was given a square deal. But I'd better steer clear of that business just now. What I'd like to have is a reason for the deadly fued between the two men."

"Possibly I can supply it," said Lord Oban, speaking with an intentness which caught every ear instantly.

"This morning," he continued, "a gentleman whom many of you doubtless know, but of whom I had never heard until certain proceedings in the law courts were

reported in the newspapers, Mr. David Leslie, a London solicitor, wrote me a quite illuminating letter. That is to say, it was written early yesterday and received by me to-day. Being a lawyer, he was cautious. I have no doubt he kept ever before his eyes the many pitfalls which beset a well-meaning person who risks prosecution for criminal libel. But, while avoiding personalities and specific statements, he certainly succeeded in showing me that my son's case cried aloud for revision.

"I admit now that a sort of unease—I cannot call it a definite suspicion—was leavening my own thoughts. Certain circumstances had of late been disturbing, to put it mildly. Then came this quite masterly exposition of the way in which my son might have been treated unjustly by those who, like myself, tried to put justice and honour before all other considerations. I said not a word to any other living person about Mr. Leslie's letter. I resolved to give it most careful and dispassionate thought. There are those now under this roof who would have hailed it with joy as bearing out their contentions. The man now lying dead within a few yards of us could not have failed to use every wile and and strategy to disprove its seemingly logical conclusions.

"So, for once in my life, I decided not to act in haste. I thought of you, Lansing, as a counsellor, and would assuredly have sought your advice at a later stage. Still, for the time being, I elected to wait until I had written to this Mr. Leslie and asked for his absolutely secret and conscientious convictions on certain points left, I have no doubt, purposely obscure in the first instance.

"Then, in most singular sequence, strange events began to happen. Your daughter, Grant, always the

soul of candour, came and told me that she had met John in Mallaig, and that he was coming here. She did not know it at the time, but I assure all of you here present that I hailed his appearance with joy, because I reasoned that he might clear up some if not all of the very difficulties I meant submitting to Mr. Leslie.

"By extraordinary chance, during luncheon this man Connington was announced. Of course, I remembered his name. How could I forget anything connected with the ghastly charge which broke up my son's life and my own? Alistair was so completely unnerved by Connington's visit that the latent doubts in my own mind, now so singularly reinforced by a communication from an utter stranger, were no longer to be resisted. At any rate, I realised the folly of stifling them deliberately.

"When Alistair left the room, therefore, I followed. I even went out of my way to try to overhear what those two had to say to one another before they could be aware of my presence. I was not altogether an adept in the art of espionage, but I heard enough to convince me that no man of non-commissioned rank in his Majesty's service would ever dare to address a commissioned officer in such terms as Connington used to my nephew unless he had an altogether illicit hold on him. Connington's first words were:

" 'Well, Mr. Alistair Panton, as you won't come south I have come north.'

"Alistair tried to be coldly non-committal. 'So I see,' he said, 'but, for all that, why the devil are you here at all?'

" 'You used to be quite quick-witted,' replied Connington. 'I've come to obtain a fair settlement long overdue. John Panton is now in Mallaig. At best I'm

only an hour or two ahead of him. He means mischief. So do I. Unless you come up to the scratch before he arrives, or give me the best sort of guarantee that you're going to play fair, I shall have to think hard as to the line I'll take. There may be more money in opening my mouth than in keeping it shut.'

"For answer, Alistair swore at him; but at that moment, in my eagerness to lose no word of their talk I went a little farther down the stairs, and my nephew must have heard me."

"'Look here,' he said, 'this is no place for discussing grievances. I'll walk back with you to the village.'

"I advanced then quite openly. 'Alistair,' I said, 'what is that man doing here?'

"'He wants my help, Uncle Hector,' he replied instantly. 'He has a claim against the War Office, and I may be able to steer him past some of the departmental obstacles.'

"Without waiting for any other comment by me the two went off down the drive. I was absolutely staggered by the glibness of the lie. At first I hesitated. Then I thought I saw my way clear before me. In the past I had considered only myself and the family pride, not an unworthy thing in itself, but an element which should not be allowed to wreck all reason. Perhaps it would be as well now if I began to think of others. There was Eileen, for instance, and John himself. How would it be if I acted in their behalf rather than my own?

"So, as Eileen had assured me that John would not reach Inverlochtié before the evening, I went across the loch and got Grant to come and help. It seemed a wise and proper course to play for time. Whatever wild schemes might be in the girl's head, she must

abandon them now if she would serve the best interests of the man she loved. So I asked her father to return with me and persuade her to stand fast until we had adjusted ourselves to the new position of affairs. He came willingly, but we could not find Eileen. I know now that she hid from us, and I know also that, acting on her own clear judgment, she had chosen the very course we wanted to urge on her. That, at least, is gratifying. It shows that a woman's heart can discover the straight path when a man's wit may miss it. Eileen, within a few hours, as it were, took voluntarily the prudent course which I had failed to find during seven years."

He rose suddenly from the table. Obviously, he was a prey to such tumultuous feelings that he could no longer speak with the restraint he had imposed on himself thus far. He had nearly reached the point where endurance cracks into hopeless collapse.

"I owe my son this public apology," he said, and his wan face went pitifully white as he tried to utter those last few words. "His guilt or his innocence yet remains to be proved. That which is beyond dispute is my own failure to give him a father's support at the time he most needed it."

John sprang up, too. He wanted to say something, to voice some protest against his father's manifest desire to shoulder all the blame, but Furneaux's almost hectic cry silenced both of them.

"Gentlemen," shrilled the detective, "the time for heroics has now passed. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the car which has just halted outside brings a doctor and an inspector of police from Mallaig. I suggest that we give one moment's close attention to the unfortunate business they will proceed to investigate. I beg

every man in this room to forget everything except the actual facts bearing on Mr. Alistair Panton's death. Its cause, even its method, is by no means settled. I tell you my own opinion for what it is worth. He was not murdered! Murder is a felony, a premeditated act. I don't believe Connington had either planned to kill Panton or meant to injure him seriously when he stuck a boat-hook into his neck. I don't ask you to accept my conclusions. I merely state them for your possible guidance. You may be surprised to-night, but I am quite sure you will be thankful to me to-morrow!"

The butler came in.

"Dr. Stevenson is here from Mallaig, milord, and the inspector," he announced. "Police-Constable Campbell is with them. I have shown them into the morning-room."

"Sheldon, go with Lord Oban," said Furneaux. "Tell them nothing they really ought to know. We must start to-morrow's work without being hampered by the rules and regulations laid down in the Police Manual."

CHAPTER XIX

WHEREIN SPOT CLEARS HIS CHARACTER

THOUGH Furneaux had made a most surprising statement he did not attempt to justify it.

"Gee!" he said, with an ill-concealed yawn. "I've not been so tired since the night war was declared. I'm off to find Timms and ask him to put me to bye-bye. . . . Mr. Panton, if you find I'm able to move in the morning don't start your search for Spot without me. Good-night, everybody!"

"Can that queer little person really be a detective?" inquired Colonel Grant when the door had closed on the man to whom every move in the deadly game being played to a close at Inverlochtie seemed to be an open book.

"He stands in very high repute in London," said John.

"We met him first in company with an eminent counsel and the chief of his department, and they evidently thought a lot of him," put in Frensham. "He's as sharp as they make 'em. Why, he hadn't looked into Johnnie's rotten mix-up for more than five minutes before he saw bang clean through the whole conspiracy!"

"What conspiracy?" said Grant.

"Why, this court-martial in France seven years ago. Mind you, I'm not saying that the court could have found any other verdict on the evidence, but why in thunder weren't some steps taken to inquire into the

character of the man who swore Johnnie's life away? I've heard a bit while crossing Scotland to-day. This lad, Ferdinand Connington, is really a Rock scorpion, one of the half-bred Spaniards born in the British zone at Gib. His proper name is Ferdinando Coningta, and it was no secret in some quarters in France that he was under suspicion as a drug merchant at the front. Why the blazes was a chap like that listened to when the reputation of one of the best officers in our regiment was at stake?"

John thought it high time to interfere, because Colonel Grant was looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"I think Mr. Furneaux has just given us two most valuable bits of advice," he said quietly. "He recommended us to say nothing and go to bed. How about it?"

"Shut up and shut eye," agreed Lansing. "I'm with you. Can I help by showing anyone to his room?"

So it came to pass that when the local inspector wished to interview the one man whose testimony bore most closely on the manner of Alistair Panton's death he was told, to his marked astonishment, that John Panton had retired for the night. That might be understandable, but he was positively irritated next morning. The procurator-fiscal, a county official of much importance in the legal and civic life of Scotland, reached Inverlochtie soon after ten o'clock, and the inspector hurried him to the house. John was again in request, but he and Furneaux and a number of gillies who know every nook and cranny of the hills for miles around had crossed the loch more than an hour earlier. They took several dogs, enough provisions to last the day out, and a sure-footed pony for Furneaux who, though in first-rate physical condition for so small a man, could hardly

be expected to tramp many miles through heather without a good deal of prior training, unless the unforeseen happened, the party would not return until nightfall.

The procurator-fiscal, a Mr. Dingwall, was none too pleased either.

"I wish Mr. Panton could have delegated his share of the search to some other person," he said. His absence will delay my inquiry a whole day."

Luckily Sheldon was close at hand.

"The difficulty is, sir," he explained, "that Mr. Panton's dog is probably keeping track of Connington, and the two know each other's ways. The dog would hardly recognise the right of any other person to interfere with him. Mr. Panton impressed this fact on his helpers before they set out. He improvised a set of signals so that anyone in a very extended line who sees Spot can stand fast and summon him."

"Is 'Spot' the dog's name?"

"Yes."

"But my difficulty, Mr. Sheldon, is that the doctor is inclined to believe that Mr. Alistair Panton may easily have met his death by being knocked over and mauled by some powerful animal of the kind."

The pupil of Sheldon's right eye, it will be remembered, was larger than that of the left. When he was peculiarly troubled, or amused, the one had a trick of contracting and the other of dilating. They did these things now, and the effect on Mr. Dingwall was rather disturbing. He was not quite sure that his own eyes were not deceiving him.

"Have you discussed that with Police-Constable Campbell?" inquired the detective.

"No. It is only a first-hand opinion formed by the doctor last night."

"Well, I'm sure you can disregard it, sir. Look at the facts. Because Mr. Alistair Panton feared, or professed to fear, a physical attack by his cousin, he told Campbell something about it. The policeman, quite rightly and most fortunately as it happens, kept Mr. John Panton under close observation. If he had not, no one can deny that Mr. John would now be under grave suspicion in the matter, and that very consideration, I imagine, is a vital element in Connington's flight. Having attacked Mr. Alistair with a boat-hook, perhaps not wholly with intent to kill, he made off in the boat which he commandeered from the mooring-ground near the bridge. The last thing he counted on was an instant alarm. But the flashing of a light on the landing-stage, the police whistle, and the accidental discharge of a double-barrelled gun warned him that the whole district was aroused. Whether the man is a murderer or not, he is certainly a criminal, and the first instinct of a criminal is not only to escape, but to throw the blame on some innocent person. Connington may certainly be trusted to assume that John Panton would possibly be held responsible. I imagine he is banking on that chance to get clear away."

"But others may not be wholly satisfied that this Connington, whoever he may be, was anywhere in the locality," objected Dingwall stiffly.

Sheldon was well aware that he must not go too far in his analysis of events until the other man was better acquainted with them. In such matters a slight barrier of doubt can easily be converted into a stone wall of prejudice.

"Have you been over the ground, may I ask, sir?" he said.

"No. That is exactly what I want to do in Mr. John Panton's company."

"Campbell was never farther than a hundred yards from him and his dog since the two left Macdonald's cottage. Shall we get Campbell now to take us over every inch of the way? I shall be glad myself to have a look at the place in broad daylight."

The procurator-fiscal admitted that Sheldon's suggestion might simplify his inquiry. They picked up the inspector and Campbell and were walking toward the village when Betty Bridgnorth came racing after them. Mr. Dingwall knew her well, as it happened, so he made no secret about his present errand.

"Oh, I'm quite a brainy young woman when I take the trouble to think," said Betty airily. "I was on the terrace, and guessed what you four were after the moment you set out. Eileen didn't sleep at all last night, so I've persuaded her to take some breakfast and have a nap. Lady Lansing is trying all sorts of dodges to keep her kiddies from hearing anything about Alistair's death until the funeral is over. Being a marvellously clever person she may succeed. At any rate, I am at a loose end. May I join you?"

"Well—er——" began the official.

"Oh, I understand. You'd like to say 'No,' but would prefer that I should take a strong hint and find some other occupation this fine morning. But aren't you making a bit of a mistake? I probably know more about this wretch Connington than anybody else in Inverlochtié at the present moment."

"You, Miss Bridgnorth?" cried the surprised Dingwall.

"Yes, I. Uncle Hector told me before breakfast what Alistair and Connington said when they met yesterday,

and, as it happened, I had a good look at Connington in the village during the afternoon. I actually guessed he wasn't English, and made no bad shot at his name in a letter I wrote to John."

"But you are telling me, or rather, indicating, a great many things which I am hearing for the first time!"

"Exactly. That is why I ran after you. Who begins—you or I, Mr. Sheldon?"

"You are doing so admirably that I hope you will carry on," said Sheldon, thanking his stars for this staunch ally.

Betty was blissfully unaware of any difficulty having arisen. She told her story in terse, vigorous sentences. By the time the party had reached the entrance to the bridle path Mr. Dingwall was beginning to view the Inverlochtie tragedy from a new and more accurate angle. The inspector, too, was an interested listener. He gave Sheldon an occasional weighing look which led the detective to try to dispel at once any new false impression which might be forming in his colleague's mind.

"Before Campbell tells us what happened from this point onward," he said, "I want to say that I could not possibly have put matters so clearly as you, Miss Bridgnorth. Furneaux and I came here in the dark. I am now seeing the place definitely, and piecing together a whole heap of uncertain ideas. I, for one, am very glad you are with us. I do really believe that when Campbell shows us exactly what occurred from the moment he left the boat and followed on Mr. Pantons' trail we shall have a fairly accurate notion of a somewhat extraordinary series of events."

This, of course, was a sop to the inspector for an

overnight reticence. Probably it served its purpose. At any rate, Sheldon heard no more of any grievance in that respect.

Campbell, too, did admirably. His evidence did not deviate a hair's breadth from the literal truth. He showed that the dog's leash was attached the instant he became excited, and that man and dog together found Alistair's body. Moreover, Spot was not at all concerned about the dead man. He was eager only to reach the water's edge. When given his head he went straight to the small stanchion to which, presumably, Connington's boat was tied.

Here Sheldon thought it advisable to strike in. With the lucidity born of long practice he lent a definite sequence to a number of apparently chaotic incidents. Dingwall was a man of the judicial mind, and eminently reasonable withal. When, an hour later, Angus Macpherson, Colonel Grant's gillie, brought specially from Glen Inver for the double purpose of being reinstated in his job and telling what little he knew, had described the man and dog he had seen crossing the roadway, the procurator-fiscal had utterly abandoned the fantastic theory that Spot might have killed Alistair.

The inspector was the next to take action. He had already circulated a recognisable description of Connington, but Lord Oban, Betty, the butler, and Minter, the village grocer, were able to add specific facts as to the man's clothing and appearance which would help materially in identification, so he hurried back to Mal-laig.

This remarkable dog he had heard so much of might have all the marvellous qualities that were claimed for him, but it was the business of the police to search for and arrest persons suspected of crime. The whole

county must be put on the quest, and Mallaig was the only practicable centre from which to work.

The doctor, too, after more detailed examination by daylight, was led to accept the boat-hook theory of that deadly wound. So, after all, Mr. Dingwall did not feel that his day was wasted. He fixed the inquest for ten o'clock the next morning, and Police-Constable Campbell set about the necessary preliminaries.

The day wore, yet there came no news from the hills. Frensham and Lansing, finding time heavy on their hands, got together a second party of scouts and crossed the loch. They vanished like the others. Six, seven o'clock came, but no one returned. It was fully eight before the launch, now in working order, towed a couple of boats back to the north side. All the searchers were on board. They had been vouchsafed neither sight nor sound of Connington or Spot. Many square miles of wild country lying east and south of Inverlochtié had been scoured most thoroughly. The utterly barren and impracticable district to the north must be dealt with next day, together with the ten miles westward to Mallaig. In this latter direction, however, Connington's ultimate escape was almost impossible, because it ended in a bottle-neck, and the road, traversed at all hours of the day by vehicles and bicyclists, ran along the watershed in many sections.

If the long hours proved disappointingly blank for the people mainly concerned in the extraordinary crime which had shaken the little community like a sharp and destructive earthquake, they provided sensation in plenty for the outside world. By mid-day the newspapers throughout the kingdom were publishing the first vague and carefully worded accounts of the affair.

At first there was a complete avoidance of that ugly

word "murder." But, as the Press correspondents began to arrive on the scene and depart even more hurriedly than they came, so as to reach a telegraph wire, comment grew more open and description more detailed. Files were searched at headquarters for the half-forgotten reports of the legal proceedings which restored John Panton to a legacy and a recognised existence. "The Inverlochtie Tragedy—Latest," figured in many headlines that evening, while the morning newspapers might be expected to contain columns of excitement.

The mere presence of the Scotland Yard men in that remote place was highly significant. It added to the piquancy of a strange story in which a fugitive criminal, pursued by an exceptionally intelligent dog, was being sought for among the hills. There was no rival sensation in the field. Though the statement may be scoffed at by every true Highlander, millions of people were made aware that day that such places as Mallaig and Inverlochtie even existed.

Sheldon was hard put to it when he had to decide whether the police should avoid the newspaper men altogether or sate their appetite by a reasonably detailed account of the actual crime. He elected in favour of the latter course. He knew well that no efforts by the authorities could stop all tongues from wagging. It was better that some of the truth should be allowed to appear rather than the wild rumours which were already current throughout the countryside.

So Campbell and the inspector, when he came back, were primed with the accepted version. It sufficed for a little while. Next day's inquest, of course, would widen the field. It was simply hopeless to think of muzzling the Press when a news item of such dramatic scope was available for public consumption.

Tired though he was, John Panton agreed to meet Mr. Dingwall forthwith. Happily Furneaux rushed into a bath. His bones were so stiff after mountaineering on the back of a pony that he would certainly be in a very bad temper, and feathers might have been ruffled. As it was, John's recital fitted into its place quite easily. He made no effort to palliate that provocative letter. He regretted ever having written it, and said so.

"I was an angry man that day," he explained, almost curtly. "My world had gone wrong and I was ready to lash out at everything and everyone."

"The position had eased considerably before you came north, I take it?"

"Yes, and no. I was taking life more philosophically, perhaps, but when the call for action came I was ready."

"What exactly does that mean?"

John took Eileen's letter—that which reached him at Windermere—from a pocket.

"It would be folly to attempt any concealment now," he said. "Read that and you will understand. Then this, and this," handing over Betty's letters. "I'm sorry Alistair died as he did, Mr. Dingwall, but there cannot be the least doubt that he was in for a horribly bad time had he lived."

The lawyer looked grave as he went through the three documents.

"You must be aware, Mr. Panton," he said, "that in the absence of certain almost accidental circumstances which point to another man's guilt you would now be in an extraordinarily difficult position?"

"Of course, I know it," said John simply. "Why should I require telling that a man can be convicted wrongfully by due process of law?"

Mr. Dingwall coughed. That was not exactly what

he meant. However, he saw fit to get away from that particular aspect of the affair.

"No one living in this part of Scotland could fail to have heard of your unhappy experience," he went on. "There are allusions here," and he tapped the sheets of notepaper in his hand, "which point to matters quite outside the scope of this inquiry. At least, I hope it may prove to be so. I——"

He was a very surprised procurator-fiscal when John smiled and promptly interrupted him.

"That is for you to decide," came the emphatic declaration. "There are those who believe—and I have come to agree with them—that my cousin conspired with this wretched fellow, Connington, to bring about my downfall. I had gone through four years of the war, and had quite a number of miraculous escapes to my credit. I ought to have been killed a score of times. I've had my shoulder-straps ripped off, my cap pierced, and my binoculars smashed by bullets, but they never broke my skin. I was dug out twice from holes made by big shells. I've been reading trench orders to a corporal and a couple of privates when a whizz-bang came across and outed the other poor chaps, leaving me untouched. I'm not telling you this, Mr. Dingwall, by way of boasting of most disastrous chances, of moving accidents by flood and field, of hair-breadth 'scapes! i' the imminent deadly breach, but because of a certain reputation I bore in the regiment for getting into and out of tight places. Alistair knew of this legend, which I should be the last man living to call a stupid one. I'm sure it kept me from worrying many a time when the outlook was black.

"It's a hard thing to say, but it really does seem as though he feared that his reversion to the title and

estates wasn't going to be worth much, so he tried to make sure. I ought to have been shot for the crime he and Connington, between them, caused me to commit. Well, I wasn't. I am assured my earlier record alone saved me. But I've gone through something like hell since I was court-martialled and dismissed from the Service, and I don't care two straws now whether the truth begins to appear during your inquest or as the result of such steps as my very good friends advise me to take. The whole miserable business must be raked up again, I suppose. What does it matter to me when the revelation comes, or how?"

John's face was set and hard. His mind had gone back to the long days of exile. Quite unconsciously, he had relapsed into his habit of quoting Shakespeare. He hardly realised that the measured words had passed his lips. He was thinking, too, of the faithful companion of his later years in the North West, and wondering what had become of him.

Dingwall murmured something, but the younger man paid no heed.

"I am sorry if I have intruded a personal matter into your official investigation," he said, rising and going to a window from which he drew the blind so that he might peer out into the night. "Somewhere out there is one of two faithful creatures who loved me when I was an outcast. They love me now that I am no longer poor and have bright prospects of regaining my good repute. One is a woman, the other is only a dog, yet if my dog does not return alive and uninjured his loss will nearly break my heart."

For a moment there was tense silence in the room. The lawyer was moved, though he hardly knew why. His glance fell again on a passage in Eileen's letter.

"If you see why I hate to have you even write to me as other than the girl you have always written to—well, that should explain much."

It certainly did explain everything. It did not need that she, Alistair's wife, should sign herself "Eileen Grant" to make clear her loathing of the "cruel deceit" she had spoken of earlier. "One is a woman!" Mr. Dingwall thought he might well close down on that branch of the inquiry. So he rose, too.

"I am obliged to you for having been so candid, Mr. Panton," he said. "It will help materially. Sometimes we lawyers are thankful to be told what to avoid. I imagine I shall never have a better instance than the present one. Of course, your evidence to-morrow will be essential. May I suggest that you allow me to question you, and that your answers shall not go outside the scope of my questions in any respect?"

John turned and looked at him fixedly.

"You are being very kind," he said. "What puzzles me now is that everyone I come in contact with is so considerate and anxious to help. Why could not some such God-given spirit have made itself felt in the supreme crisis of my life? Then I was left to fend for myself and did it very badly. Now, when I am eager to fight, I find friends in the most unexpected quarters."

A knock on the door heralded the appearance of Lord Oban, Lansing, Frensham, and Furneaux.

"We were told you were here, John," said his lordship cheerfully. "If Mr. Dingwall's inquisition is ended perhaps you will both come to the drawing-room. Lady Lansing and Betty want you there."

It was amazing how he had changed in a few hours. The excitement of the previous day and night had

made him look frailer than ever, yet here he was carrying himself with the air of a man who had found the elixir of youth, and was shedding the years with the passing minutes.

John was so struck by the alteration in his father that, for the moment, he hardly realised the omission of Eileen's name. Then, since the men had evidently congregated in the hall or billiards-room, he missed Colonel Grant.

"Eileen isn't too ill to show up to-night?" John asked quickly.

"No. She crossed the loch with her father this afternoon. I have no doubt she left a message with Betty. But, in any case, none of us could persuade her to stay. My own notion is that she and Grant will return when—when all this present turmoil is ended."

The underlying cause of Eileen's sudden flight was quite obvious. Her position in Inverlochtié was intolerable. After being married to a man whom she had defiantly refused to regard as a husband she was now, in the eyes of the outer world, an inconsolable widow. In the hours of supposed grief at Alistair's loss her heart was literally aching with joy because of her lover's nearness. No wonder, therefore, that she sought the seclusion of her own old home.

John admitted the force of these considerations, yet found them irksome. There seemed to be always some perfectly good reason why he and Eileen should be separated. He sighed whimsically.

"I have hardly set eyes on Betty yet," he said, "and Lady Lansing I have not seen at all. What about it, Mr. Dingwall? Anything else you want to know? Don't worry about speaking out in front of my father and my friends. I have nothing to conceal."

"I don't think we need say another word about the affair to-night, Mr. Panton," said the lawyer.

"Excuse me one moment," put in Furneaux. "Do I understand, sir, that you are the procurator-fiscal?"

"Yes."

"Ah! This is most interesting. I have never before met one in the flesh, though he is a personage often encountered in Scottish history and fiction. When you have a minute to spare you must tell me how your title came into being."

Dingwall, having heard already something of Furneaux's peculiarities, suspected this suave address. It might be an instance of the gentle art of leg-pulling. On the other hand, it might not.

"It is an ancient and honourable office," he said. "It combines many rôles which across the Border are filled by different individuals. If you have ever witnessed a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's opera, 'The Mikado,' you will recall a character known as 'Pooh-Bah.' Well——"

Evidently Inverness was not going to quail before Scotland Yard, but the deduction Mr. Dingwall was about to make will never be known, because all present became aware of a car panting up the drive and halting at the west door.

The men were passing out into the hall on their way to the drawing-room, but halted to see who this new arrival could be, as the lodge-keeper had strict orders to admit no other visitors that night. No bell was rung; the door was flung open. It was Eileen.

Ignoring all others, she almost ran to John Panton.

"I know you've had a most trying day, dear," she said excitedly, "but there seems to be news of that wonderful dog of yours, and I felt you ought to be told

to-night. Two of your friends, Mr. David Leslie and his niece, May, have just reached our place by car. They were coming here, but the chauffeur mistook the road in the half-light. Between Mallaig and Inverlochti—I think it must be near Macdonald's Gap—they heard some animal howling. Miss Leslie, who is Canadian by birth, says it was a wolf. But there are no wolves in Scotland, and as soon as she knew what really happened here she vowed it must be Spot calling for help. Will you come?"

Would John come to Spot, who was summoning him? Well, there are some questions that require no answer.

CHAPTER XX

THE RESCUE

THE problem of the moment was to limit the search party to those who could fairly claim real knowledge of Caledonia, stern and wild, when her rugged and picturesque features are veiled by night. The place named by Eileen, Macdonald's Gap, offered difficulties enough to sure-footed mountaineers during daylight. After dark it became a fearsome tangle of steep hills, rock-strewn streams, heather, brambles, and gorse, with here and there a small precipice or waterfall, and in nearly every hollow a patch of treacherous bog. In fact, the natural obstacles of that particular section of the watershed had always prevented the making of a direct road from Fort William to Inverlochtie, else Mallaig would not have remained for centuries the sole link between the glen and the outer world.

John was the admitted leader of the expedition, but Furneaux, magically recovered from the day's excessive fatigue, became his adjutant. It was he who gently but firmly vetoed Lord Oban's presence, and Colonel Grant's, and Mr. Dingwall's, and Mr. Leslie's, the latter, waiting outside in a car with May and the Colonel, having been brought into the house while the preparations were being made.

May Leslie, of course, reckoned confidently on her services being indispensable. Was it not she who had recognised Spot's long drawn-out wail when the car

was halted momentarily by a flock of sheep in the roadway? Surely her right to share in the hunt could not be disputed? Indeed, she was inclined to protest rather vigorously against her rigid exclusion until Eileen, better acquainted with local conditions, whispered quietly in her ear that the presence of a woman would put an almost impossible handicap on the men.

Lansing and Frensham had to be enlisted because they drove their own cars. Lord Oban's and Colonel Grant's cars were available, that in which the Leslies came through from Fort William having remained at Glen Inver. Fortunately, the police inspector had returned from Mallaig in order to supervise the arrangements for the morrow's inquest, so he and Sheldon, with a couple of imported constables, formed the armed party, Furneaux having decided that the police alone should carry pistols. For the rest, a dozen gillies and keepers provided themselves with stout sticks and a couple of electric lamps apiece. Some food, a flask of brandy, and a couple of bottles of whisky with drinking cups and a supply of soda water were also taken, since the expedition might be out until after sunrise.

Everybody worked so quickly and efficiently that the last car, Colonel Grant's, got away within fifteen minutes. It was delayed a few seconds by a bit of genuine brain work on the part of a youth who appeared carrying an ambulance stretcher, the identical litter which had conveyed Alistair Panton's body from the landing-stage about the same hour the preceding night.

"Happen we'll be needin' this!" he said gruffly, thrusting his unwieldy burden along the top of the folded hood, and climbing in himself, irrespective of the fact that two burly constables filled the back seat already. They made room for him readily. It would

be a score against those smart Londoners when the stretcher was produced should there be á casualty.

John had no sooner heard about the sheep than he was in a fever to be off, so Frensham took him. Furneaux, and the head-keeper in the leading car. He read the position of affairs correctly, as they were all to know in less than a quarter of an hour. Every sheep within earshot of that strange cry of the wolf which the husky adopts when in peril or need of assistance was frantic with terror, and made headlong for the road, where its instinct foresaw the guardianship of men and dogs. The farmers would gather with shotguns and sporting rifles, of which latter there is always a plentiful equipment in a deer-stalking country. In a word, Spot was in far greater danger from those whom he would regard as friends than from the potential enemy he was pursuing.

The procession of cars down the avenue and through the village brought all the inhabitants out of doors. Even the residents in Inverlochtié House gathered on the steps to watch the fast-vanishing lights and listen to the last purr of a speeding engine dying away beyond the steep hill at the head of the loch.

Mary Lansing, who by no means approved of her husband roaming over the moors of Inverness-shire on a night which threatened to be pitch black because of clouds, had been silenced by a quite definite glance from her dear Reginald. She made the best of matters by chatting easily with Eileen and May Leslie.

"By the way," she said suddenly, "what has become of Betty?"

No one knew. Betty had come with her from the drawing-room when Eileen's arrival startled the household. She had merely gripped John's hand without a word and then listened to the rapid consultation and

flow of orders. Lady Lansing did not remember seeing her afterwards.

Mr. Timms was appealed to. He coughed nervously, said he would make inquiries, and vanished. At that, Mary Lansing took thought, but, being a kindly soul, said nothing. The butler returned with a strange story. A young gardener, who at times deputed as a gillie when the moors were being shot, having occasion to go to his room for an extra torch, had found Miss Bridg-north there, and was told in no gentle terms to make himself scarce.

So he occupied a strategic position on a staircase, and, within a very few minutes, saw a sturdy figure flit past arrayed in his cap, shooting-coat, knickers, leggings and boots. The said figure was carrying a bundle of feminine garments; being a thorough Scot, he simply went for the lamp, and said nothing to anyone about Miss Betty's masquerading.

The butler told his story with commendable reserve. He made only one slip.

"It must have been Miss Betty who brought the stretcher," he said. "I wondered at the time who it was, but it seemed all right, milady, and I could hardly interfere."

"Of course not, Timms," was the smiling comment. "In the midst of all this excitement the marvel is that you noticed even so much. . . . Eileen, where were your sharp eyes?"

"Glued on Car Number One!" said May promptly. "I guess mine were, too. . . . Say, shall I call you Eileen right away? We're dyed-in-the-wool friends, really. I heard of you first in Edmonton. That boy of yours is the truest thing ever. I tried to snatch him up, but—oh, my!—didn't he hand me the frozen mitt?"

Not that Arthur Frensham isn't more in my class. I can keep him within the white line without a touch on the brake, an' so can you with John, I'm sure. On the whole, the selection committee for the two-seater Life Stakes couldn't have paired us off better!"

Eileen was not one to resist such a frank advance.

"Bless you, my children!" purred Lady Lansing, as the hands of the two met, and they were not altogether certain that a friendly kiss might not be exchanged at such short notice. "Existence in the Highlands just now is a liberal education, but I'll have an awful time with my kiddies when they hear you talk, May Leslie. They will want to pick up all your phrases. I do myself."

Lord Oban approached. He had just heard of Betty's escapade, and was amused by it.

"She may prove a good deal more useful than many of the men," he said. "Everybody seems to forget the rough time she had in Serbia and Italy. A man in charge of one of our field ambulances on the Piave told me that Betty——"

Well, that was ancient history. The stowaway was already pardoned at headquarters, at any rate.

Frensham narrowly avoided a holocaust of mutton. The road, as it neared Macdonald's Gap, was full of scampering sheep running toward the car—sure sign of panic caused by an alarmist agency somewhere in their rear. Indeed, around the next bend a collection of men and dogs was already pouring through a gate into a strip of rough pasture-land which formed the edge of the moor. They halted when they saw the car's lights, and the excited whimpering of the younger dogs was silenced. Most fortunately, as it proved, some of the more cautious heads had not only counselled

delay but secured it thus far. Spot's fame had travelled many a mile that day, and it was assumed that he must be responsible for all the commotion. To search for him with a mixed pack of sporting hounds was obviously not the right thing to do, yet some action was called for, or every flock-master in the district would have good ground for complaint next day.

Of course the farmers present were acquainted with the headkeeper from Inverlochtié, and the majority recognised John, so they fell in willingly with the scheme put before them. All dogs and guns were debarred from the chase. The man who held the grazing rights on the very land whence those doleful wails came offered to act as guide. With him went John, ever ready with a friendly grasp on Furneaux's elbow. Behind marched a posse of nearly thirty.

The topography of the moor in that locality lent itself to an enveloping movement. The actual "Gap" consisted at the watershed of a fearsome swamp, bounded north and south by steep hills, each broken into ravines by a dozen or more watercourses. After heavy rain any of these would have been quite impassable. Now, as the result of a spell of fine weather, they were mere trickles of moisture deep hidden among channels cut in the rock. Nearly all concentrated in the bog, whence, after devious burrowings, one definite stream turned north and another south. Both began a brief but turbulent life by plunging downward in cascades through clefts choked by boulders and hardy shrubs. In effect, the narrow path so abounded with difficulties and positive dangers that it was avoided by shooting parties and by all but the most venturesome of tourists. And this was when daylight showed every foothold and lent suspicion to every smooth green patch. At

night the Gap could hardly be crossed at all save with exceptional luck, and this is a factor not always present in such undertakings.

Spot could now be heard quite clearly. He was up there somewhere between the two hills, not so far away in actual distance but cut off from the rescuers by at least half an hour of most arduous climbing. Even those who had never before heard the ululating cry of a wolf soon came to realise that this weird sound was a definite signal and not the mere clamour of an animal in pain or distress. It was repeated at regular intervals, and each successive period of silence was so obviously occupied by a most admirable pair of ears in listening for a response that John was hard put to it to refrain from giving a reassuring hail.

If he did that, however, he might easily defeat the very purpose Spot was serving. The dog was near Connington—so near that the man's every move was visible. He was probably worn out by prolonged exertion and lack of food. If he had crossed the hills between Loch Inver and Macdonald's Gap he had already accomplished no mean feat of endurance, yet spurred on by despair, he might break through to the south if made aware of pursuers, when it would be utterly impossible to follow him that night. Indeed, the only practical course then would be to patrol the road between Mallaig and Fort William. Thus and so did John reason. As Spot undoubtedly had a sense of humour he probably laughed.

About half-way up the ascent a small plateau supplied a breathing space. Here a council of war was held.

John's original plan had been to detach two flanking parties from this very point and thus prevent the

fugitive from escaping laterally. But when next Spot raised his voice there was a new note in it—a sort of imperative and rather impatient yelp. At that John himself grinned cheerfully at his own folly.

“I am becoming civilised,” he said. “Two months ago I wouldn’t have made such a mistake. Spot knows perfectly well we are here, and is telling us to hurry. Connington cannot get away. He is either injured or dead, and my dog will not desert him. Unfortunately, we have forgotten one thing which we may need most urgently, but that cannot be helped now—”

“If you’re talking about a stretcher, John, it is not twenty yards away,” said someone out of the darkness.

“You, Betty?” he gasped, and he was so genuinely startled that his voice literally quavered.

“Yes, I. Don’t worry. The other poor females obeyed orders and stood fast. I received none, so here I am, and likely to be useful, too, I should imagine.”

A light was flashed—downhill, of course; it revealed a trimly-built figure in the under-gardener’s best sporting kit.

“*Sacre nom d’un pipe!*” cackled Furneaux breathlessly. “I don’t suppose I shall ever see Scotland Yard again, but if I do and you want a job, Miss Bridgnorth, it’s yours at sight.”

“Not in these trousers, I hope,” giggled Betty. “Carry on, John. Don’t worry about me! I’ll come along with the ambulance when it’s wanted.”

Spot yelped again—this time complainingly. What was the matter with Master that he should be halting down there to chat with some woman? John took command once more.

“The police should follow close behind me and Mr. Anderson,” he announced. “I think we can dispense

with the extended line of scouts. If it is found necessary later to cover more ground you others must open out right and left when I say 'Scatter.' Everyone must halt when bidden. Don't attempt to touch the dog. Leave him to me. He will not molest anyone unless interfere with."

If it were not for the wretched cause of that wearying and strenuous struggle with an increasingly difficult climb, the real appeal to the imagination might have been made by Spot's artistry. He knew to a yard how the relief force was progressing, and modulated his call to an occasional growl. Once, when a sudden twist in the greater ravine rendered necessary a considerable detour, he barked loudly. John thought then he might venture on a word of encouragement.

"Steady, Spot!" he said, and Spot replied, after his fashion, that steady it was.

At last Anderson whispered hoarsely:

"We're lippin' the edge o' the bog noo, Mr. John. Ye hear the water splashin' awa' tae the recht. Yon's whaur the burn——. Gude help us, what's that?"

A pair of golden eyes shone through the darkness. In another second Spot was leaping at John, his paws on Master's chest and a great tongue extended in a welcoming lick.

Then he was down again on all fours and pressing forward with John's hand on his collar. Thus they went, crouching through heather that mounted high over the man's bent head, until Spot stopped and growled. John switched on a torch. He knew by the sound of falling water that he was very near the first cascade, and was prepared for the fact that the cleft opened at his very feet. In a sense, too, he was ready for the supreme discovery. Some fifteen feet below,

close to the pool of the small cataract, and ominously crumpled up, lay the body of a man. It moved slightly when the light flashed into the depths, and a ghastly face was uplifted.

"I may be either dead or dreaming," came the cry in a shrill falsetto, "but if there is someone up there, speak, for God's sake!"

John was taking a chance, and knew it. The Connington he had met in that dreary London club was hardly sane; now, this hunted and maimed criminal might have become a homicidal maniac. Still, he could not choose but answer.

"It's all right, Connington," he said quietly. "Help is close at hand. You will be carried into safety, if that is what you wish."

Some welling forth of pity for his crippled enemy evoked that singular qualifying clause. Thus might one who had passed through the Valley of Despair commune with another who could not hope to escape from its evil slough. But his words met with a strange response. The stricken body seemed to collapse altogether. The pallid features shrank away from the vivid glare of the lamp. When he and Spot, with Furneaux close on their heels, reached Connington's side it was difficult to say offhand that the man yet lived. His eyes were closed, his face waxen, and, in the moisture-laden air surrounding the cascade, no breathing was perceptible.

Anderson, the farmer, took it for granted that he was in the presence of death.

"Eh, sirs," he muttered, "but it's a dreadful thing to be hunted into eternity wi' murrder on yer soul!"

Furneaux, however, though so physically exhausted that he wanted to throw himself down on the heather

and sleep, was alert as ever in mind. He thought he could detect a feeble pulse, and had seen already that Connington's right leg was broken, nor did he fail to note the remarkable fact that a boat-hook had evidently dropped from the fugitive's hand when he fell, because it lay athwart a rock at a little distance.

"I think he has only fainted," he said. "It is better so. You two can carry him up to the smoother ground while I show a light. Then we can give him some brandy and put him in the stretcher after doing our best to make that smashed leg more comfortable. That is the only possible course. He may never revive in this saturated atmosphere."

John and the sturdy sheep-farmer made light of their part of the undertaking. Soon the whole company had gathered on the hillside, and Connington was placed on a couch of heather, while Betty showed herself a thoroughly competent hospital nurse by her skilled manipulation of the broken limb. She ripped open trouser-leg and underclothing, used her own strong hands with the aid of a policeman who understood first aid to pull the bones into position, and applied and bound tightly the cotton wool and set of splints which were attached to the stretcher. She had just made an end, when the injured man groaned heavily, and regained his senses. He gulped at the brandy, which seemed to revive him instantaneously.

"The dog!" he gasped feebly. "Who is there? If you have a heart, keep that dog away!"

"I am quite sure the dog never touched you, Connington," said John.

Not for one second would he allow the impression to get abroad that Spot had pulled down his quarry.

"Who said he did!" came the querulous reply. "But

his cursed eyes followed me through the night, and I could not shake him off by day. I never saw him then, but I knew he was there, so I laid in wait and tried to kill him, but he bested me, and I fell."

"What do you mean?" demanded John sternly. "Did he knock you over?"

"No, curse him! He dodged, and I slipped. He was just playing with me all the time. But what does it matter? My number's up. Is that skunk, Panton, really dead?"

"Unfortunately for both him and you, my cousin, Alistair Panton, died almost at once."

"I'm not mixing up one Panton with the other. Who could kill *you*? Not the whole German Army, assisted by a dunder-headed British court-martial. Don't I know it? Well, you've won at last. We played a dirty trick on you, and we have got what was coming to us. Of course, I wasn't trying to kill that precious cousin of yours. He tried to bluff me, but he was dealing with the wrong man. . . . Got any more of that brandy? Let me have it. It's my farewell drink. . . . I've been lying in that gully for hours—ever since sunset—and I'm chilled right through. Before I pass out you may as well know that I doped you that morning in France. It wasn't my scheme. I had no grudge against you. But Major Panton had the goods on me for purveying cocaine, and I was for it. He was too damned foxy to say outright that if you went West at the first opportunity I'd be let off, but he hinted it. I knew what he meant all right. But the scheme came unstuck. I only tried to make you dotty—then Fritz would do the rest. I suppose my hand shook that morning—and why shouldn't it? Wasn't I behaving like a filthy hound—I, who prided myself on being a smart soldier? . . . Hi,

you gapers, listen! This is Captain the Honourable John Panton, and I was his company sergeant-major, and I served him the dirtiest trick one man ever did to another. It wasn't he who should have been court-martialled, but his cousin and I, Ferdinand Connington, one-time Ferdinando Coningta, born at Gibraltar. . . . Curse the shivering cold—give me more of that liquor!

Then Betty took charge.

"No more for you until your wet clothes are removed and we can get you to sip some hot milk," she announced firmly. "Cheer up! You're not half so ill as you imagine. I think that leg of yours is not a compound fracture, so it may not require resetting. And stop talking! You've said enough already! Come along, you men, with the stretcher. Slide it under gently. Two lift his body below the waist, one at his feet; I'll manage his head and shoulders. So! That's capital. Now carry him down. Halt at the bad places and form a double line, passing the stretcher from one set of hands to the next."

The Honourable Betty had not asserted her authority a moment too soon. Connington sank into a state of coma from which he did not recover until long after Dr. Stevenson had come from Mallaig and examined him in a bedroom at Anderson's Farm, whither he was conveyed. Moreover, Betty was not unaware that Sheldon, dropping to his knees behind Connington, had produced a notebook and was taking down in shorthand every word that was uttered, Furneaux meanwhile holding a torch at his shoulder.

With difficulty, of course, but without the slightest mishap, the party reached the road again. At the earliest moment Anderson went ahead to prepare his household and warn the men who had remained behind

with the dogs that those enthusiasts should be kept under strict control until Spot was safely secluded in a car. A good deal of time was consumed in making temporary arrangements for Connington's disposal. Nominally he was a self-confessed criminal in the custody of the police, whereas actually he had to be regarded as a helpless cripple who ought not to be moved for weeks once he had been put in a bed.

The inspector thought he ought to be taken to Mal-laig at once, Anderson's farmhouse being so remote from Doctor and suitable attention, but Betty refused emphatically to permit of any delay in getting the man between warm blankets.

"Drive him seven miles in an open car now and you will kill him," she said. "He is in a fever already. I think he's bound to have pneumonia, in any event. Don't argue, please! Hurry him into Anderson's place. I'll remain there until you bring the doctor and a nurse. Tell Dr. Stevenson there are no stores or appliances of any sort available. He will understand."

The inspector gave in. What else could he do? Betty assumed that there was no more to be said. She strolled over to the group of men from Inverloch-tie.

"I think you got to-night nearly all the evidence you wanted, John," she said. "Connington may live and tell us more. On the other hand, he may pass away in delirium. At any rate, with all those witnesses you should soon be cleared. . . . Sir Reginald, your wife tells everybody you're a dear. Be one, then, and send your chauffeur back with the car and my clothes. Don't let Mary or Eileen worry about me. I shall be here for hours. But I'll try to turn up for breakfast. Has anyone thought of giving that marvellous dog something to eat?"

Furneaux, leaning on the boat-hook, sighed most wearily.

"Will someone take me home and tuck me into a nice, soft bed?" he said dismally. "Your head keeper tells me, Miss Bridgnorth, that Spot was feasting on a plump little rabbit in between howls. Probably he has breakfasted, lunched, and dined far more regularly than any of us to-day. As for me, I shall never forget Scotland—never! It's a wonderful country, and Inverlochtie is a wonderful place. It will live in my memory always, at a safe distance of five hundred miles, I sincerely hope. But if *I* feel I have barely escaped with my life, what chance had that poor, drug-soddened wretch, Connington? If ever man rushed to death and disaster, he did."

"Hurry off with your friend, John," cried Betty. "These southerners invariably talk that way at first, but before they've been here a week they are wearing kilts and learning to play the pipes, whereas we poor Highlanders seldom do either."

For once Furneaux was silenced. The little man had reached the end of his tether. During forty-eight hours he had slept about six, and that very day he had ridden and walked over some thirty miles of the roughest country which even Inverness-shire can show. So he let the woman have the last word. Being a philosopher in his way, he knew she would secure it, anyhow.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SETTLEMENT

FURNEAUX recovered rather speedily. He had to. When the expedition drifted back to the glen—a slow journey owing to the scurrying sheep, in whose anxieties Spot was deeply interested—both the village and the great house on the hillside were wide awake and avid for news. Eileen and May did not return to Glen Inver until the mountain-tops were aglow with the crimson and gold of a magical dawn. There was so much to hear, so many things to be told. For a little while a quite happy and joyous party managed to forget that a man was lying cold in death under the same roof.

But Mr. Lingwall and the representatives of the Criminal Investigation Department gave heed to that quite pertinent fact. An inquest was to be opened within a few hours and the newspapers of the whole kingdom, already devoting their principal news columns to the tragedy at Inverlochtié, would publish every obtainable detail. It was hopeless to think of keeping back a single fact bearing on Alistair's death or Connington's capture. Far too many ears had heard and eyes seen the strange things which had happened. All that the representatives of the law could do was to devise the best means of letting the British public know the truth.

The truth! But who shall define truth? That was the crux of the whole matter. Alistair was dead, and

human nature, being what it is—a compound of hardness born of experience and of emotion born of vague longings for shadowy beatitudes—is apt to resent any whitewashing of the living at the expense of the dead. Moreover, there was that in the manner of his death which cried aloud for the charity called Christian. No matter how ignoble the secret records of his life, it would be a short-sighted policy which laid them bare at the moment his many friends were shocked by his untimely end. For Alistair could be gracious and charming when he chose. With increasing wealth he could afford kindly actions, even benevolences. Probably the majority of those who knew him would scout any ill repute attached to his name.

Long and earnestly did the officials debate this aspect of a most complex and difficult affair. Ultimately it was decided that the inquest should be opened formally next morning, and only such evidence recorded as would permit of the burial certificate being issued. Then, as the man not only suspected of the crime but admittedly responsible for it, in a degree which the law had yet to determine, could not be brought to trial for many weeks, there must be an indefinite adjournment.

That would give everybody time to readjust their personal views to the new conditions, and, with the funeral, much of the excitement would vanish. Of course, there need be no great delay in putting John's case before the authorities. Departmental action can be none the less effective because it is not accompanied by the blare of trumpets. To secure unanimity in this vital matter John himself and Mr. Leslie were called into the conclave. In the law, as in life generally, it is ever the first step which counts.

It was then nearly two o'clock, and Spot was

stretched in luxurious repose on the drawing-room rug, but he did not fail to lift an inquiring head when Sheldon tapped on the door with a request for the presence of the two men. John called to Eileen and asked her to tell Spot to lie down.

"Spot," she said, trying not to smile; "lie down, there's a good dog!"

He obeyed instantly, paying not the slightest heed when his Master left the room.

"That's an extraordinary instance of delegated authority," commented Sheldon as the three went downstairs to the morning room.

"It's not at all remarkable when one allows for the peculiar conditions of everyday existence in the Northwest," explained John. "During the busy season, when I was often necessarily absent, Spot was taught to obey all manner of people, half-breeds, and Indians and the like. He fully understood that they were my deputies. It was amusing to watch his air of blank indifference if they gave him an order after I had returned. There may be an alteration in the case of the young lady now left in charge. I'm afraid I must be prepared for a divided allegiance. The feminine influence was beginning to work at Mr. Leslie's place. It should become quite pronounced here."

The procurator-fiscal had found a kindred spirit in David Leslie. The two had fraternised already, so there was prompt agreement as to the course to be followed during the next few days. At last Furneaux raised his diminutive body slowly out of the depths of a comfortable chair by a careful balancing act in which both hands and feet shared equally.

"If I yawn I may dislocate my jaw," he said. "An incautious movement might rick every joint. No man

has ever been more tired than I and survived it. Please don't reckon on me for active service until the day after to-morrow."

Nevertheless, after a few hours' rest the little detective was himself again. He avoided the inquest, it is true, but was ready for the fray when an urgent message from Dr. Stevenson warned Mr. Dingwall that Connington's depositions should be taken, since there was every indication that he would not last out the day. He was already showing marked symptoms of a sharp attack of pneumonia, but his heart was in a bad state too, and the real danger lay there.

Furneaux suggested at once that John should attend with the representative of the law.

"Mr. Panton is the only person who can persuade Connington to reveal the actual facts," he urged. "No matter how willing, the man himself cannot judge the true value of his information unless the very officer he tried to ruin is before his eyes. He is sure to ramble a good deal and try to palliate his actions by putting a gloss on them. In Mr. Panton's presence, however, he will be constrained to tell us just what took place in France, and that is the one thing of vital importance now."

Mr. Dingwall was surprised.

"Important enough," he said, "but I hardly agree as to its relative importance. Surely what we want to know first and foremost is how Mr. Alistair Panton met his death."

"But we know now, don't we?"

"Most certainly I don't. I assume that Connington struck the blow which proved fatal. But what was the immediate cause of the quarrel? How did the two come to meet at such a late hour in a secluded place like

the landing-stage? What was the object of their meeting? Were threats exchanged? I cannot understand, Mr. Furneaux, why you say we know these things because we do not."

It cost the detective a real effort to refrain from pointing out that the dramatic scene by the side of the lake was a human document writ so plainly that those who ran might read. Those two men shared a secret which, if revealed, involved both in ruin. He knew, just as surely as though Alistair Panton had told him, that the fatal deviation was made when Sir Reginald Lansing announced his forthcoming departure. Panton then lost his temper. Beaten and rebuffed at every turn, he decided to wreak vengeance on the poor dupe whom he had bent so easily to his will in France. But the dupe had grown desperate, and had never been a physical weakling, as his army career proved beyond question. And that was Alistair Panton's undoing. He played his own hand, and gave no thought to that of his adversary.

Mr. Dingwall, however, might not appreciate an analysis of motive translated into action which would almost savour of necromancy to one not aware of Furneaux's peculiar genius. So the disappointed artist sighed.

"You're right, of course," he said sadly. "Jumping to conclusions has been the bane of my professional career. Had I conquered the habit early in life I might now have been Mayor of Pudsey or Chief Constable of Middlesbrough."

The procurator-fiscal had a sense of humour; it warned him once again that Furneaux hardly ever said what he meant. He saw clearly, however, that if Connington meant telling the whole truth John's presence

was essential. Fortunately, too, Sheldon was an expert shorthand writer. A dying man's depositions have to be put on paper at the time, read to him, and, if possible, signed and attested. A record of the proceedings in shorthand is a different thing altogether, and might prove invaluable when the whole affair was submitted to a court of inquiry.

When the four men reached Anderson's farm they were received by Betty Bridgnorth. The doctor's diagnosis had changed her plans. She thought that John's interests demanded her constant presence, and a district nurse from Mallaig was only too glad to have the help of such a thoroughly efficient assistant.

"You must contrive to make this business quite informal," she advised. "Connington's nerves are in a very bad condition. If he gets too excited he may relapse into delirium and die without recovering consciousness. The one thing he cannot endure is the barking of a dog. Anderson has banished every cur in this house for the day, and Police-Constable Campbell, stationed in the road, is trying to stop the yelping of passing mongrels."

"Is the man willing to testify, do you think?" inquired Dingwall anxiously.

"Yes. I think I have convinced him that he ought to play the game, even at the eleventh hour. He is under no delusion as to the gravity of his state, and wishes now he had fallen in France, as the intervening years have brought nothing but misery. . . . Are you all ready? There's a small table, with pens, ink, and paper by the bedside, but I dared not bring in more than a couple of chairs. Don't troop after me. Drop in quietly—John and you leading, Mr. Dingwall."

It was a new experience for a man who had grown

grey in the public services to have a woman take charge of him and his duties with such calm detachment. Furneaux's features assumed their Japanese mask expression, but his eyes twinkled. What a story he would have for Winter when next they dined at Pucci's!

Connington's bed stood between the door and a window which was not in the centre of the wall but nearly opposite the door. Betty and the nurse would have changed its position had he not begged to be allowed to look out. He would not even let them lower the blind when the sun shone directly on his face. There was a pathetic significance in the whim, and they did not gainsay it.

He was lying on his back, of course, owing to the broken limb, but his head and shoulders were well propped up. When the new comers entered the room he turned slightly, and his unnaturally brilliant eyes passed from one face to the other.

"Good morning, sir," he said to John in a weak but distinct voice, just as he would have addressed his company commander off parade in the old days.

"Good morning, Connington," said John. "I'm sorry you're so badly crocked."

His kindly tone, the utter absence of rancour, the smile of the war-time leader for a known and trusted soldier—those perfectly natural traits in so far as John was concerned—seemed to have an alarming effect on the stricken man. His sallow skin showed a more extreme pallor, and he began to swear at himself in unmeasured terms. Obviously, he was not so much moved by remorse as by a sense of his own folly.

Betty Bridgnorth put an arm under his shoulders and lifted a glass of brandy and water to his lips.

"Come, now, Ferdinando," she said cheerfully,

"that's no way to speak before a lady. Pull yourself together, my lad! Here are some excellent people come to see you. Tell them what you have told me, and you will do my cousin John a lot of good, while it won't cause you a ha'porth of harm."

Connington, after sipping a mouthful or two, suddenly recognised Furneaux.

"Hallo!" he wheezed.

"Yes, you're right," said the detective. "Don't mind me! I'm present unofficially."

By this time Mr. Dingwall had reached the table at the head of the bed and beneath the window.

"I don't suppose the doctor will allow you to talk for longer than a few minutes," he broke in. "I had better explain that if you wish to make a statement as to recent occurrences, or events of a prior date, it is my duty to write your exact words, which may be used in evidence against you or for any other purpose which the law requires. Perhaps it will make matters easier if I read what you said when Mr. Panton and his friends found you last night. I have here a transcript which I am assured is accurate. You may feel disposed now to approve or amend it."

Without further delay he produced and read, slowly and distinctly, Sheldon's notes of the broken talk which took place about twelve hours earlier up there on the heather-clad crest now visible through the window.

It would need the pen of a De Quincey to depict the vivid though chaotic memories which must have flitted through Connington's bemused brain as he listened. He quivered slightly at the references to Spot, but nodded approval of the rest of the record.

"Yes, that's right," he muttered. "That's how it all came about. I was in a tight place, and did not care

how I got out of it. I had been brought down the line to Bailleul, and Major Panton, who was inquiring into the drug traffic, soon proved I hadn't a leg to stand on. . . . You remember, captain, don't you, that I was absent for two days just before that big push? I actually told you at the time what the trouble was, but led you to believe that it was a general investigation which only concerned me in regard to the men in our company."

"I do remember now," said John. "I didn't give the least heed to it then. I never suspected that any of our fellows had acquired the drug habit. I don't believe many of them even knew what it meant. To this very day I don't know myself."

Mr. Dingwall's Scottish shrewdness stood him in good stead then. He realised in an instant that Furneaux had gone to the heart of this extraordinary affair in the bit of advice tendered that morning. This was an irregular way of taking a deposition, but he did not interfere.

"Oh, it was easy to humbug you and the other officers," said Connington. "We drug fiends had our own means of communication, and I was making pots of money. That's how the major caught me out. Too many remittances to a London bank through the base. After an attempt to bluff I had to own up. Then he seemed to think hard and began hinting at the one slender chance I had of redeeming myself. Someone had told him I was good at my job, and he said he disliked the idea of putting me away at the very time I was in line for a commission. He even laughed at the stupid coincidence, as he called it, which actually united our interests, because it so happened, oddly enough, that my company officer blocked *his* way to a

title and estates. I thought I understood and said so, but he was not to be drawn any more until I begged for a month's reprieve. He agreed. If I hadn't made good by the end of that time I was for it. Of course, if he was here now he'd swear at once that he was talking about the drug business, but I knew he wasn't. Five days later, when things were a bit quiet, he saw me again in Armentières and gave me the tip that a full-size battle might be expected next day. 'That may give you your chance,' he said, smiling as though he was thinking only of my affairs. I began operations that very night by starting some gossip among the sergeants and hiding a good half of our Mills bombs. That got the wind up with you, captain, as I knew it would. Then, when early coffee was served, I doctored your share. No trouble in doing that. You were worrying about the bombs. I gave you a stiff dose, the effects of which would wear off in a couple of hours, but the devil would have it that the attack was postponed from six till nine, so with second breakfast I had to administer another lot. That, in your already unsettled condition, turned you fair crazy. I wanted to make you reckless, but I actually drove you out of your senses altogether. . . . Well, that's the pretty story. A rotten business, wasn't it?"

Most fortunately, John's natural indignation yielded to a feeling of genuine pity for the broken man who wheezed out this sordid confession in gasping breaths each of which threatened to be his last. All the bitterness, all the agony, seemed to have gone from his life since he came to Inverloche. Eileen's constancy, Alistair's untimely death, had conquered the longing for revenge. He could not find a word wherewith to taunt the poor wretch gazing at him with those gleam-

ing eyes, the wistful, pleading eyes of an animal in pain rather than of a human being.

So, when he spoke, it was to ask the very question which Furneaux was anxious to put on his own account.

"When you came back to England, or at any other period after I left the Service, did you see my cousin and discuss matters?" he inquired.

"Yes, many times. I had plenty of money, enough to last me for another year or two yet, so I laughed at the fivers and tenners he offered, just to speed me on my way, as he used to say. I wanted more than that—a safe allowance for the rest of my days—and I promised to hold off till he was Lord Oban. You see, I had failed in part of my bargain, which would not be completed until he was a peer and a big land-owner. Then came the 'Oban Peerage Case' in the newspapers, and you turned up, fresh as a daisy, in the Gamma-Delta Club, with one of the smart division from Scotland Yard—that's you, Funny-face—and I knew the game was up, so I rushed north to collect when my man refused to come south. I gave him a reasonable chance. He has only himself to blame for what has happened. Of course, I wasn't such a fool as to think of killing him. What good would that do me? I might have planned something of the sort later on, if I was down and out. But not now, thank you. I wanted money and plenty of it. If he refused to part I would probably have come to you. . . . *You* had that at the back of your head, hadn't you, Mr.—?"

"Furneaux."

"Ay, Furneaux. The London crooks say you're the flyest cop in the 'Yard,' and they may be right. Yesterday, when I took a breather while crossing those infernal hills, I began to wonder how far you were

responsible for the present row in the Panton family."

"I?" and Furneaux's eyebrows twitched with apparent surprise.

"Yes, you. They tell me you have a finger in every pie that's cooked nowadays by rotters like me."

Then Mr. Dingwall thought fit to assert himself.

"All this must be most interesting to Mr. Panton and other members of his family," he broke in, with a little cough of excuse for interrupting a story which did not bear directly on the crime under investigation, "but in your present state, Connington, I think you ought to husband your strength. Therefore I must ask you if you are prepared now to tell us what happened the night before last."

"No need to make a long yarn of that," came Connington's muttered reply. "Get your papers ready and take down what I say. . . . All right? Well, there was no beating about the bush for me. I travelled through from London and fell in with Captain Panton both at Fort William and Mallaig. What is more, I saw the young lady whom Alistair Panton had married. I fancy I know a bit about women, but I'll have to go to school again in the next world if that nice-looking girl cares two straws for anyone on earth except Captain John. . . . Yes, put that down. It's important, because—don't you see?—it gave me another hold on Alistair. I went straight to the Castle and sent in my name.

"The major came out in a towering rage, but that didn't flurry me at all, and he was becoming a trifle more reasonable when an old gentleman, Lord Oban, I believe, joined us. He had heard enough to make him suspicious, but I didn't mind that—it was really a score for me—so the major hurried me off to the village, and we arranged to meet that night. He supplied all neces-

sary directions, as to the boat and the landing-stage, I mean, and made such a show of concealing my movements that I'm pretty sure he meant to shove me into the lake and keep me there till I crocked.

"Not being exactly that sort of a fool I wrote the whole story and put it in a sealed envelope, which I posted to my bank in London with the request that if my death was reported the enclosed letter was to be sent to Scotland Yard. As I'm going to die now, Mr. Furneaux, my written 'confession' will reach you by the next post."

The man chuckled dreadfully when he noted the astonishment on every face.

"Yes, that's O.K.," he said. "What's the good of lying? Well, we met as planned, and the major offered me £50, which I just pushed back at him with a grin. Then he pulled a revolver, but I stopped any excitement by telling him about the letter safe in the mail-bag. At that he swore at me, said he didn't care a rap for any charge I could bring against him, and turned on his heel. Now, I had been as cool as a cucumber up to that point, but I've been taking a lot of cocaine recently, and was missing it more than ever that evening, so I gave way to a cold fury, snatched at the boat-hook I had used for making a quiet landing, and reached after him, intending to pull him back by main force, at the same time lifting the automatic out of his pocket. I felt the hook catch and thought it was in his collar, so I jerked it hard. He fell backwards, and I knew in a second I had made the biggest mistake of my life.

"He gurgled something, but he was done for, so I scrambled into the boat, thinking that, perhaps, no one would associate me with the affair if I could reach

Mallaig without attracting attention. I may as well admit, too, that I believed Mr. John here would be the first to come under suspicion. Of course, he might be able to clear himself, but at the moment I didn't care whether he did or not. I was only a few feet away from the boat-house, and hidden by it, when a light flashed on the landing-stage, and I heard voices.

"Then a police whistle was blown, evidently to raise an alarm, and in a minute or two a gun was fired. That broke me up. I lost my nerve and crossed the lake instead of going back to the bridge as I had intended. Oh, I remember now—a car came along the road at the wrong time for me. While I was still trying hard to recover my wits and decide how to act for the best I set eyes on that damned dog. He finished me. I went almost out of my mind, I suppose. All through the night I imagined I was being followed by the devil. Even now I can't guess how he got on my track so quickly. Dogs don't swim across wide lakes."

"This dog does," said John, not even trying to repress a smile, because Spot was more to him than all the Alistair Pantons and Ferdinand Conningtons in creation. "He and I watched you disappearing in the mist, and I sent him after you."

"Well, well—was that the way of it? . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Lawyer, if we gallop ahead of your pen, but between you it will be easy to put together what I have said, and I'll sign—if I can. I've told you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help me——!"

He fainted before that last appeal to the Deity passed his lips. Betty Bridgnorth was not at all flurried. She watched his eyes and felt his heart.

"He will die before the day is out," she announced

calmly, "but he is sure to recover consciousness soon. Leave him to me. Please send in the nurse, who is sitting in the garden at the back. I'll warn you when he is fit to receive you again, Mr. Dingwall."

An hour later the procurator-fiscal read what he had written, Sheldon's notes supplying the full text. Connington listened in silence to the end. Then he took the pen given him by Betty, and added a brief sentence before signing his name. His handwriting was shaky but clear. The few inserted words were much to the point. They ran:—

"I am sorry for all the mischief I have caused. I ask my old company commander to pardon me."

Mr. Dingwall showed that pathetic scrawl to Panton, who was waiting outside, leaving to the detectives the task of attesting the signature.

"What are these initials after the name?" inquired the puzzled lawyer.

John swallowed hard before he answered.

"C. S. M.—company sergeant-major! Dash it all! Why couldn't things have turned out differently for each one of us?"

He went back into the room, where Betty and the hospital nurse were trying to persuade the dying man to drink some beef tea. He sought for and held a trembling hand.

"Connington," he said, "if my forgiveness is accepted by the last great tribunal as a final settlement, it is given now, fully and freely. You may even recover. If you do, and you win through the present scrape, come to me, wherever I am, and you will find that I shall remember our four years of comradeship and forget that one day of evil."

Their eyes met. Connington's face twitched dread-

fully. He uttered no word, but it was evident that he understood.

"Leave us now, John," said Betty hurriedly. "He must be allowed to rest."

Betty Bridgnorth was indeed a kindly soul. Connington was dead before John had passed through the doorway, but the official time was stated as being a quarter of an hour later.

* * * * *

So there were two funerals at Inverlochtie, one a stately parade, the other inconspicuous, but all the more impressive because of its simplicity. No one talked of going away until Alistair and his unfortunate ally were laid to rest. Then Lord Oban called a meeting in the drawing-room one morning after breakfast, and explained that though the heavens fell the moors must be shot over on the Twelfth. He had powerful supporters in four women. Indeed, Lady Lansing put forth a strong appeal.

"I have been faced with something like a mutiny in my family," she said. "I disdain to mention a husband utterly out of control, but I have two small boys who became positively sulky when they heard that their father took part in a most exciting adventure while they were sound asleep. I am not certain that Moira is not worse than her brothers. She has made a friend of Spot, and assures herself every night that he is safe indoors before she goes to bed. What will happen if he wanders out some evening after dark, I dare not guess. I believe my young barbarians will lower themselves from a window by knotted sheets. I think, however, that a few weeks of fishing and long tramps to lunch with the guns may restore discipline in the ranks."

"More than that," added Betty, "if we all break up now everyone will think there has been a frightful shindy among the survivors. If we send hampers of game as usual the gossipers will be silenced."

"And much more than that," put in May Leslie. "I'm rolling in glory in the Edmonton papers every week. What about it, uncle? Deauville doesn't cut any ice in comparison with Inverlochtie, does it? Auntie writes that she would love to come here. And Arthur said this morning he hoped Lord Oban would invite him for August next year, at any rate."

Frensham reddened to the roots of his hair at this direct testimony, but John rescued him at once. A look from Eileen sufficed.

"That settles it," he cried cheerfully. "I heard from Mr. Mountford this morning, and he says I shall not be wanted in London until October. Government departments refuse to be hurried. Mr. Furneaux gave me a sort of hint, too, that if I wished to square the C. I. D. for ever and a day I might invite Mr. Winter to join us. He's a first-rate shot, it seems."

It was only to be expected that there would be no immediate talk of weddings. Indeed, it is more than probable that May Leslie took the plunge first, as her father arranged to visit England early in the autumn. Eileen and John had a tacit agreement that a quiet marriage in the local kirk during the following January would be just right. They planned to spend the succeeding summer in Canada, heading straight for Moose Lake, where certain benefactions were due to Mosquito Joe and a genial sharpener of razors, named Macdonald, assistant factor at Peace River Landing. Spot, of course, has acquired a Scottish domicile and will retain it, since he might not escape the pains and

penalties of the law so easily next time he proposed entering the country.

But he will be quite happy, though his beloved Master may be absent for a few months. He is a general favourite all along that part of the coast. Certain ill-disposed curs had to be taught that he had come to stay. But there is no harsh feeling in the matter; when he takes his walks abroad nowadays even the postmaster's pair of Highland warriors are ready for a lively scamper. Acting-sergeant Campbell and he are close friends.

Best of all, he has received a card stating that during his anticipated frequent visits to London he is on the free list at Pucci's.

As Furneaux put it:

"This is a privilege conferred on few men, on no woman, and on no other dog. Long may you live, Spot, to do honour to a company of the elect!"

THE END

